This time, it'll be different
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This time, it'll be different

by Kb_Ellen

Summary

Hyunjin sighed as a third person nearly dove headfirst into the locker lined wall to avoid him. He shouldn't have been surprised; it was always like this and it had only gotten worse since he'd added the shaved head and the eyebrow piercing to the mix. But still, it was better than being teased and taunted over being a cry baby. It was senior year; all he had to do was keep under the radar.
But a certain blond hybrid is making that a lot harder than normal.

Notes

Hello, hello my lovely readers!!! ❤□❤□❤□ Oh, I've missed you all so much! For all my returning readers, thank you so much for your patience □ For all of my new readers, thanks for giving this story a chance! I mentioned this on Twitter but life has been very rough lately and I'm still sort of going through it. BUT, I'm hoping this story can be a bit of an escape for all of us. It's light hearted and fluffy and very unserious. After Devil on Your Shoulder, we're still taking a break from the angst (...for now...), so I hope this story can be a fun, little bright spot for you all! It was purely an excuse to put Felix in a cheer uniform and give him ears and tail and I'm so not sorry about it lol. That being said, this is a High School AU but I want to stress, EVERYONE IS LEGAL. There's not a lot of explicit content in this story but still, I needed to make sure that was clear lol. ALRIGHT, enough yapping...let's get to it!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

In retrospect, the eyebrow piercing had probably been a bad idea.

Hyunjin sighed as a *third* person nearly dove headfirst into the locker lined wall to avoid him. He shouldn't have been surprised; it was always like this and it had only gotten worse since he'd added the shaved head and the eyebrow piercing to the mix.

He slowed down as he approached the office, hand nervously clinging to the strap of his backpack as he felt those familiar first day nerves creep into his system.

This time, it'll be different, he thought to himself, trying to keep his shoulders from caving in under the weight of his anxiety.

This time, I'll make friends.

He pushed open the glass door to the office, the rush and noise of the hallway fading out drastically as it swung closed behind him. The woman at the desk peered up, her soft, immediate smile dulling the moment she laid eyes on Hyunjin.

He couldn't exactly *blame* her. The leather jacket and ripped jeans didn't help his case or make him look like the honor student he actually was. So he swallowed down his nerves and offered a tentative smile, approaching shyly.

"Hello, my name is Hwang Hyunjin and i-it's my first day." He grimaced at his little stutter. God, he was so bad with new people. Or just like, people in general. Sincerely, why his parents had ever allowed him to leave the house was a mystery. "I-I was told to stop by the office before class t-to get my schedule? And my locker assignment and…and yeah." He looked down to his worn boots. They were perfect for riding his motorcycle and comfortable enough to wear around school all day so they got a lot of use. They were starting to show it too. He hoped no one would notice.

He heard the woman hum lightly and peaked back up at her. His shy demeanor must have softened her initial impression of him and she offered him a gentle smile. "Well, welcome to Pine Crest High, Mr. Hyunjin. We're happy to have you."

He nodded in thanks, waiting as she typed a few things into her

computer and nodded, seemingly having found him in the system. “Here you are,” she muttered a moment before the printer behind her yawned to life.

She collected the paper and swivelled back around, laying them out on the desk top and laying a manicured fingernail on the first one. “Alright, I’ve printed out a few things for you. The first is a map of the school. It’s two levels so page 1 is the ground floor and page 2 is the second floor.” Her nail clicked mutedly against the little “You Are Here” star sign that fell on the office that he was indeed at. “Next, I have your class schedule. You’ll have your first 4 classes and then lunch, followed by your last three.” She spun them back around and examined his schedule while rapidly highlighting the room numbers on his map.

“Thank you,” He muttered quietly, secretly so grateful she’d done that. His last school had been much smaller. In fact, this might have been the biggest one he’d ever attended and that was saying a lot because this was already his third high school.

She smiled and nodded, flipping the pages back around and pointing to the fourth an final page. “Lastly, I’ve printed out a calendar of all the first semester events. It’ll be a good way to meet people and make some friends!” She said cheerily.

And Hyunjin just smiled back because she didn’t know that he was too shy for his own good. She didn’t know that the very thought of meeting a new person had his heart beating double time. She didn’t know that every time his family moved and he was pushed into yet another new school that he felt a bit like crying.

So yeah, he just smiled like he was excited to meet his peers instead of mildly terrified, his blood racing too fast through his veins.

She smiled back at him and grabbed the phone on her desk. “Here, I’ll call the student body president over to show you to your locker and get you to your first class.”

“O-oh, no! You don’t have t-”

“Bang Chan to the office please. Bang Chan, to the office.”

He heard her voice echo through the intercom system, the student body outside the door looking up as if expecting to see god himself speaking to them. But nope, it was just Carol from the front office.

She set the receiver down with a click and smiled up at him. “He’ll be here soon, he’s always very prompt. Feel free to take a seat while you wait.” She gestured towards a line of uncomfortable plastic chairs along the wall and Hyunjin nodded with a sickly little smile. He walked over and folded himself into one, back rigid and at attention.

He let his eyes drift out the glass walled office and linger over the hustle and bustle of the first day. Students were hoisting heavy backpacks further up their shoulders, eyes bleary and still caked with summer sleepiness. Some of them were probably hungover, if it was anything like Hyunjin’s last school. He saw students screaming and running to embrace friends they hadn’t seen all summer, clinging to them like they’d been separated by space and time and not just a handful of miles and the lack of a license. He watched as a couple walked by, fingers laced and swinging proudly between them. He watched as all of these kids - his *peers* - seemed to move within the crowd effortlessly.

Whether in a group or alone, they seemed to *belong.*

This time it will be different, he repeated in his head. *This time I’ll make friends.*

Hyunjin had never been a social butterfly. It simply wasn’t in his nature. And he didn’t really think it was that much of a problem, to be honest. The world needed quiet introverts just as much as it needed noisy extroverts. He was more than content to keep his head down, reading his poetry and learning to paint and day dreaming endlessly in his head.

But when he was ten, his family moved. With the move came a big pay increase for his father but also a brand new school for Hyunjin. And a brand new school meant all new faces. And these faces weren't as content to let Hyunjin keep to himself.

He’d always been sort of tall and lanky, a bit awkward with his limbs as they started growing longer than he could learn to use them. His mom lovingly called him *Bambi* but he didn’t think it was all that cute when a kid at school told him he looked like a giraffe who didn’t know how to use his legs.

And then he’d made it all so much worse by crying about it. So now, he wasn’t just the giant who couldn’t figure out his long legs, he was *also* a cry baby.

That year had been hard. But, at the end of it, they’d moved. Again.

Turned out, his dad had received a new assignment at work. He could decide to commute, four weeks at the new location and two weeks home, or he could bring his family along. With urging from his wife *and* Hyunjin, he decided on the latter.

And Hyunjin was more than happy to pack up and leave to a new location. And yet another new school. But it didn't get any better there. He was still too tall and too shy and too sensitive and kids were mean.

This pattern repeated itself over and over. Sometimes, he'd stay for a year. Sometimes less. His mom worried that all the moving was stunting his social growth. She asked Hyunjin if he'd prefer to stay, maybe just let his dad commute. But he didn't like the idea of the family breaking apart for the sake of some kind of stability he wasn't even sure he wanted.

And then he'd turned fourteen. His dad had bought an old motorcycle, thinking it would be a fun way to bond with his son and teach him a new skill and Hyunjin, had surprisingly, really enjoyed rebuilding it. He also just really liked hanging out with his dad, so maybe that was the draw. They spent a whole year slowly, meticulously, fixing that bike. And once it was done, his dad had turned to him with a wide smile and a leather jacket and handed him the keys.

And by sixteen, he'd had a license, a motorcycle and a brand new style. And the most miraculous thing happened: people started to leave him alone. The kids at his new school didn't pick on him. They saw a tall guy, leather jacket and ripped jeans, booted feet heavy on the linoleum and they thought he was bad news.

Nevermind that he liked to keep a copy of love poems in his backpack at all times. They didn't see that. What they saw was an imposing figure who hardly ever spoke. Suddenly, awkward and quiet became aloof and mysterious. And Hyunjin just…went with it.

It was better than getting teased and harassed. It was better than being called a crybaby.

But he'd quickly realized that there was one drawback to all of this; everyone, and he meant *everyone,* avoided him now. Assumption about him ran wild everywhere he went. In his last school, there'd been a rumor that spread about how he'd knifed a guy in the parking lot. Hyunjin, to this day, still had no idea how this rumor had come about, but he'd watched as people parted like the red sea around him

in the hallways. He watched as people whispered fearfully behind shaking hands, avoiding his eyes when he so much as tried to pass a paper back in class.

And here, he could already tell, it would be no different.

“Is this him?”

Hyunjin was pulled from his musings by a sweet voice and looked up to find a guy his age looking down at him with a smile.

“Yes, yes, that’s him! This is Mr. Hwang Hyunjin. He’s new to the school and I was hoping you could show him to his locker and perhaps deliver him to his first class?” She smiled fondly at Chan, like he was simply her favorite person.

And honestly, when Chan nodded and smiled at Hyunjin, dimples popping deep in his cheeks, Hyunjin kind of got it.

“No problem,” He said to the receptionist before turning back to Hyunjin and extending his hand aimiably. “Hey! My name’s Bang Chan, I’m the student body president for our senior class.”

Hyunjin blinked at the offered hand, hardly able to comprehend such a kind, welcoming gesture. He reached out slowly, noticing his black nail polish was already a little chipped and clasping it lightly, giving it a single shake before withdrawing and standing from his seat.

He found it hard to look directly at Chan. His smile was so bright, so cheery. Hyunjin wasn’t used to that kind of reaction from people.

But Chan didn’t seem deterred in the slightest as he began to lead Hyunjin out of the office, a wave thrown at the staff over his shoulder. “Alright, let me see your locker number,” He said, leaning close to Hyunjin to peep at the papers in his hand. When he located it he nodded and smiled. “Oh! I know exactly where this is. It’s right above one of my friends' lockers.”

This guy probably had a million friends. He was handsome, polite, probably smart and had an infectious smile. God, Hyunjin would *kill* to have even *half* of his charisma and easy going charm.

“Good think you got a top locker! It would really suck if you had a bottom locker, what with how tall you are.” Chan said conversationally.

Hyunjin nodded in agreement, secretly so thankful that he wouldn't need to put his knees or spine through all that bending.

"So, where did you move from?" Chan asked. Every few steps, it seemed like someone was saying hello to him or patting him on the shoulder. He was clearly *very* popular. Hyunjin hoped he wasn't damaging his reputation by walking next to him. He wondered if by the end of the day, the student body would assume that Hyunjin had sold Chan drugs and corrupted him or something.

"Hyunjin?"

He snapped back to reality, remembering that Chan had asked a question. "O-oh. I uh, a small town like…four hours away?"

Chan nodded, shooting him a look of sympathy. "Must be tough. Moving so far away at the beginning of senior year."

Hyunjin just shrugged. Sure, it wasn't his favorite thing but it also wasn't like he was leaving behind a whole lot either. It was just part of the pattern.

"Well, I think you'll like it here! We have a lot of different clubs and sports teams, if you're into that?"

Once again, Hyunjin merely shrugged. Chan was probably a jock. Would he think it was lame if Hyunjin told him he liked painting flowers?

But nothing threw this guy off. He merely kept smiling as they turned a corner. "Alright, this one is yours," He said, pointing to a cherry red locker.

"Thanks for your help," Hyunjin said quietly, turning to his locker and carefully twirling the lock to open it. He got it on the first try, letting out a long, grateful sigh. Last thing he needed was to struggle with it and be late to his first class.

"What's your first class?"

Hyunjin startled, having expected Chan to have left by now. "I uh…" He glanced down at the schedule in his hand. "World History III," he muttered.

Chan nodded, watching as Hyunjin dropped a few books in his locker and crammed his motorcycle helmet in there. He smiled once he

slammed the door closed and turned. “That’s upstairs, I’ll show you the way!”

“You really don’t have to.” Hyunjin hurried to say as he followed, regardless. “I know it must be a-annoying to have to help the new kid on the f-first day back.” He winced at his stutter. It wasn’t usually this bad but his nerves were through the roof. Not only was he talking to a new person but that person was talking *back*. That wasn’t how this was supposed to go. This was *never* how it went.

This time it will be different.

This time I’ll make friends.

Chan brushed it off, swatting the words out of the air. “Don’t worry about it, I don’t mind at all.”

Hyunjin wanted to fight a little bit more but honestly? He appreciated the help. Plus, he didn’t want to seem ungrateful. So he followed swiftly, careful to stay close and not get lost. He’d feel so bad if he ended up causing more trouble for this poor guy.

“Here, let me see you’re schedule.” Chan said, holding his hand out expectantly.

Hyunjin silently passed it to him and watched as Chan flicked his eyes down, trying to keep one on where he was going and read his schedule.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m seeing if we have any classes together.” Chan furrowed his brow and handed the paper back to Hyunjin with a sad little smile. “Doesn’t look like it. But you should totally eat lunch with us. Do you have block A or B for your lunch?”

Have lunch with us?

Us.

Like…him and his friends?

“Um, block B?” It came out like a question.

“Damn, we’re in block A,” Chan said with a frown. He looked genuinely upset about it and Hyunjin, for the life of him, could not understand why. He’d hardly said a full sentence to the guy.

But before he could ask something embarrassing like *Why are you being so nice to me?* They came to a stop outside a classroom and Chan smiled up at him.

“Here we are! You’ll love Mr. Minjo, he’s super laid back. Good way to start the morning.” He smiled like he really meant it and Hyunjin couldn’t help but bow ever so slightly, gripping his papers from the office tightly. “Thank you so much for your help, Chan.” He said, proud when he didn’t stutter or choke on nothing but air and his own nerves.

Chan smiled. “Don’t mention it. And hey, I’ll see what I can do about lunch, okay?” He turned with a wave before disappearing back into the crowd, leaving Hyunjin staring after him.

See what he could do about lunch? What did that even mean?

He decided not to dwell on it as the five minute warning bell tolled.

*****

The day was going fairly well, all things considered. He’d only had one teacher make him stand in front of the class and introduce himself along with a “fun fact” about what he did this summer.

“I…moved?” He’d said, eyes glued to the cinderblock wall at the back of the class, trying not to feel the eyes on him. What, was he supposed to tell the entire class that he’d gotten really into pressing flowers this last summer? No way in hell.

He’d also only been late to one class so far, realizing too late that he was holding his map upside down. He’d gotten quite a few looks as he stumbled in nearly ten minutes late. The teacher had glared at him, looking him up and down and deciding that with his tardiness and pierced eyebrow, he was going to be a troublemaker. He’d apologized quietly and made his way to the back of the class towards an empty seat and sat down, trying to make himself small.

And *just* as he was starting to adjust, just as he was starting to feel the attention slide off him and himself becoming a bit more invisible, the intercom crackled on overhead: *Hwang Hyunjin to the office please. Hwang Hyunjin, to the front office please.*

He heard the quiet, hushed '*oooo*' that reverberated through the room. He sighed and stood, hating that he had to be so tall and noticeable. He was sure by the end of the day, every single person in the school would know that the scary looking new kid had been called to the office not even halfway through his first day. The rumors would run rampant: he'd been selling drugs, he'd been vandalising cars in the parking lot, he'd been smoking a joint outside the gymnasium.

He kept his head down as he pulled his backpack back up his shoulder and carefully wove his way out through the desks and into the hallway.

He could hear the whispers starting already and the way the teacher tried to shush them back down.

Maybe this time wouldn't be different. Maybe this time, just like every other time, people would assume, based on how he looked and the clothes he wore, that he was up to no good. Maybe this time, he'd still be socially inept. Maybe this time, he'd just sit silently, letting people make up lies about him because at least it was better than getting teased for being soft or emotional or romantic. Maybe this time, he'd sit and let the world pass him by again and again.

He snaked his way through the quiet hallways, not a single soul in sight. The silence of the halls during class always kind of freaked Hyunjin out. It felt like the population had vanished and simply left him behind. Like he was the last person left on earth.

He hurried his way to the office, head down and eyes on his feet. He turned the corner, the office in sight at the end of the hall when his eyes were caught by something whipping around the opposite corner and disappearing the other way. He furrowed his brow, wondering if he'd officially lost it because…had that been a *tail?*

He felt the childish want to chase after it but if they did indeed have a hybrid at this school, he didn't want to scare the poor person half to death by running after them just to, what? Gawk at them?

Hyunjin shuddered and shook his head, keeping his path straight and avoiding the little detour his mind had suggested.

He entered the warm, bright little office with his head ducked down.

The receptionist looked up at the sound of the door opening and smiled softly at him. "Aw, Mr. Hyunjin. Any trouble finding your way back?"

He shook his head, standing with his shoulders a little caved in, hands clasped innocently in front of him. “Am I…in trouble?” He asked, wanting to cut to the chase. Had the rumors about him already started? Was he going to get detention for something that never even happened?

But the receptionist was shaking her head immediately. “Heavens no, nothing of that sort. She gave him that same soft smile as before and Hyunjin felt the tension in his shoulders melt a little. He looked at her curiously as she shuffled through a couple papers on her cluttered desk.

“It seems that Chan has taken a liking to you. He asked to switch your lunch period to match his so I printed off a new schedule for you.”

“He…what?” Hyunjin took the offered paper on autopilot. He stared at it like he couldn't comprehend the words on the paper. He was utterly dumbfounded.

He heard her chuckle a little under her breath but he couldn’t peel his eyes off his revised schedule. This didn’t make sense. It didn’t *compute.*

“He came back in after escorting you to class and asked if it would be any trouble to change your lunch block so he could continue showing you around and introduce you to a few of his friends.”

Hyunjin’s head was spinning.

“And we’re not really *supposed* to but Chan is just so sweet. And he never asks for hardly anything so I figured it wouldn’t hurt.” She smiled amiably when Hyunjin finally looked up at her. “He’s a good kid, so be nice to him, okay?” She pointed a soft finger at him, lacking the kind of threat that most teachers and staff had for him.

But he merely blinked and, before he could stop himself, asked, “A-are you *sure*?” When her brow furrowed with confusion he added, “Like, are you sure he meant *me*?”

Her brow smoothed out, her gentle smile back. “Well, we don’t have another Hwang Hyunjin, so yeah, I’m pretty sure he meant you.”

He was ready to argue back more ill formed points when the bell tolled and she smiled at him. “Looks like it’s time for you to get to lunch.” Her smile brightened. “Do you need any help finding the cafeteria?”

He shook his head, feeling dazed. He was pretty sure he waved at her or thanked her or something before he drifted back out into the hall but he couldn't really remember because seriously, what the fuck had just happened?

He'd hardly said three words to Chan. So why was this guy rearranging his schedule? Is *this* what he'd meant when he'd said he'd '*see what he could do'*? Not only had he done just that but it had *worked.* Which meant, as class president, Chan actually had some power and sway with the staff. Hyunjin had always thought that title was sort of a hollow one. Looked good on college applications and maybe helped with popularity but he hadn't thought they'd really *do* anything. Let alone decide to sherpa the new kid around. But here was Chan, having the receptionist wrapped around his little finger with his sweet, dimpled smile and his easy to like personality.

Which brought Hyunjin right back to the very question he'd started with: *why*? He had nothing against Chan. Not a single thing. But he also didn't *know* him and it wasn't like he attracted a lot of friendly faces. He knew how he looked. He knew how he presented and yeah, maybe he hid behind it a little too well. But that meant that Mr. Popular, Student Council President shouldn't be knocking down his door, trying to hang out and, what, introduce him to his other friends?

What kind of twilight zone had Hyunjin entered into?

Maybe this time really *would* be different.

He wasn't sure if he liked it though. It all felt a little overwhelming, a little too sudden, a little too suspicious.

He let the crowded hallways move him, like sheep in a herd, towards the cafeteria. The smell of cheap pizza and disinfectant told him he was getting close. It was the same in every single school he'd ever been in.

He walked through the big doors, some kids sprinting towards their friends at a table and others making their way over to the line for food. Hyunjin, eyes curiously scanning the room, didn't see Chan.

He focused back in on grabbing a tray and following in line as a greasy slice of pizza was slapped down on his plate. He got a bottle of water and skipped any of the options for sides, his stomach too tied up in knots anyways.

He emerged from the line and stepped off to the side so he wouldn't

block the flow of traffic behind him. His eyes wandered around the room, looking for an empty table. But this school was huge and it seemed like every table was at *least* half taken up. He really hoped this wouldn't be like his seventh grade year when he'd had to eat locked in a bathroom stall. Nothing killed an appetite quicker but it had been preferable to sitting at a table and treated like a leper.

"Ay! I found you!"

Hyunjin whirled around as he felt a steady hand thump down on his shoulder.

Chan was smiling up at him, looking just as kind and unworried as he had this morning. This guy had endless energy.

"Y-you…hi." Hyunjin said lamely, not sure what he was supposed to say. Seriously, was this all some kind of joke? Did 'introduce you to my friends' just mean that he was gonna get jumped? Or did this guy just take his duties as student council president *very* seriously?

Chan smiled and, hand still on Hyunjin's shoulder, started leading him into the maze of tables. "I hope you don't mind that I rearranged your schedule a little." He looked up with a nervous smile. "I just thought it might be nice to have some people to sit with on your first day and I know everyone would really like to meet you."

"Everyone?" Hyunjin muttered. "I…why would they want to meet me?"

Chan shrugged. "Because they're nosy. And you seem like a nice guy."

You seem like a nice guy.

When was the last time someone had ever said that to Hyunjin? Usually, people thought he looked like he'd spent a year in juvie. And he got it: the safety pins in his ears, the black nail polish, the heavy boots, really, he *got it.* But it didn't mean that it didn't hurt when people passed judgement so quickly based on skin deep stuff.

Hyunjin still had about a million questions but he didn't get a chance to ask before they pulled up to a rowdy, packed table and every single head swung in his direction.

"Everyone! This is Hyunjin. It's his first day, so behave, okay?"

“We always behave,” One of them said with a devilish smile.

Chan rolled his eyes and sighed, sitting down and pulling Hyunjin down next to him.

Hyunjin felt a shoulder bump his on the other side as the person on his other side leaned in. The guy was built, his shoulder round and rock hard. “Don’t ever listen to a single word Seungmin ever says, he’s an absolute menace.”

Hyunjin’s wide eyes slid off the sweet smile of the muscly man to the guy who’d spoken earlier - Seungmin, apparently.

“Now our little Jeonginnie makane, you *can* trust. He’s a total angel.” He pointed to the boy sitting next to Seungmin with a round, smiley face who was now rolling his eyes.

“Oh please, I’m not an angel. That’s Lixie.” He paused, looking around as if finally noticing something. “Speaking of which, where is he?”

The guy next to him shrugged but Chan answered. “He had some schedule stuff to do at the office and then he had to pick up his new uniform from the gym. He should be here soon.”

The guy next to him nodded before laughing. “Oh, I’m Changbin, by the way.” He finally introduced himself, offering his hand like a true gentleman.

Hyunjin was only mildly horrified when he blushed like a teen girl and shook his hand. He really wasn’t good at this small talk thing.

But Changbin didn’t seem to care. “So, how’s the first day been so far?”

Chan turned to watch him as he shoved a fork full of salad in his mouth and chewed.

Hyunjin shrugged, swallowing around the lump in his throat. “It’s been okay, I guess.” He hoped his voice didn’t sound as nervous as he felt.

Changbin nodded along like they were exchanging their woes at a bar. “I feel that. The first days of a new school year are always tough. Even harder when you’re the new kid. Trust me, I was the new kid last year.”

“You were?” Hyunjin said, feeling shocked. The way Changbin seemed to fit in with this group made it seem like he’d always known them. Gone to school with these guys since kindergarten or something.

The brunette beamed back at him, seemingly pleased by Hyunjin’s surprise. “Yup! But looks like you stole the title this year.”

“Where did you move from?” Seungmin asked from across the table, his devilish smile from earlier gone and replaced by a much simpler, peaceful one.

Hyunjin paused to swallow his mouthful of water, coughing a little. “Oh um…really small town a few hours away. You probably haven’t heard of it.” He hardly remembered the name of it, to be honest. They’d only been there for 8 months.

Seungmin seemed about to say something back when he was interrupted by a loud whining voice saying, “Minhooooo, please?”

Everyone at the table besides Hyunjin groaned before he heard Seungmin mutter, “And so it begins…”

Curious, Hyunjin looked over to find a small brunette tailing after a slightly taller guy who had a calm, stoic face, even under the weight of the other guy’s impressive puppy dog pout.

“Please Minho, just this one? I promise, I’ll be good later.”

“You’ve been saying that since we were 7. How on earth did you even get behind on the *first* day?”

The smaller guy crashed down into his chair dramatically, flopping his head back and lamenting to the ceiling about how the teacher had been mean and given them a pop quiz on the first day and how he’d lost his lucky pencil and maybe, just maybe he’d stayed up too late last night reading manga and had woken up late and maybe had sort of fallen asleep during said pop quiz.

The other guy - Minho - watched with this tiny little mildly amused smile, like he was so beyond used to this kind of excuse. Which, considering he’d mentioned knowing each other at seven years old, perhaps he was.

“Hey, wait! Who’s that?” The shorter boy was up and out of his seat in the next second, looming over Hyunjin where he sat, eyes *sparkling* as they focused in on his eyebrow piercing. “Did that hurt?”

“Ay! Jisung, manners! At least introduce yourself first,” Changbin chastised, throwing a carrot at his excited friend.

Jisung, eyes still stuck on the shiny metal in Hyunjin’s face, hurried out, “Hi, my name is Jisung, so did that hurt? Can I touch it?”

“Oh my *god,* Jisungie, we’ve talked about this! You can’t just ask to touch people’s faces!” His friend he’d walked up with came waltzing over like he was going to physically pull him back.

He glanced at Hyunjin and offered a nod. “Minho.” He said simply.

“Hi. I’m Hyunjin.” He said, beyond proud of himself for not stuttering this time and then feeling pretty pitiful about how *that* was an accomplishment to him. Awesome. Eighteen and *finally* able to introduce himself without having a mild heart attack.

He cleared his throat, determined to push a little hard. “And yeah, it hurt a little but not as bad as I was thinking it would.”

Jisung nodded, his smile a little awed like he thought Hyunjin’s piercing was the coolest thing ever before those boba eyes swelled up, getting wide. “Wait, you’re the guy who rode that motorcycle to school, right? Everyone has been talking about it.”

Hyunjin felt his tentative hope take a sharp nosedive. He was sure whatever this guy had heard hadn’t been great, if past experience was anything to go by. He really hoped none of them would ask if he sold drugs. The last time some popular guy had seemingly befriended him, it was because he was hoping to get cheap weed and adderall that Hyunjin did not have.

“Y-yeah. I’m uh…I’m sure they are.” He said softly, looking down at his plate and hoping they’d at least let him finish his pizza before they kicked him out.

Changbin snorted beside him, like he could read Hyunjin’s despondent thoughts. “Psh, don’t worry about it man, let ‘em talk. It’s just words. We’ll back you up.” He said it so easily, his chest puffed out and everything.

“Why?” He said, unable to hold it in. He was sure his forehead was a mess of lines and wrinkles that his mother would tell him would become permanent if he didn’t quit it.

But Chanbin just shrugged. “Chan said you seemed nice and a little

shy. He's usually a pretty good judge of character, so you must be alright. Plus," He added, leaning forward to grin at Chan on Hyunjin's other side. "Chan would do anything for Lixie."

Hyunjin frowned. That was the second time he'd heard that name. "Who's that?"

Changbin smirked and leaned back in his chair. "He should be here soon."

The taller man didn't really know what to do with that so he focused on his pizza, taking small bites and making sure to be careful with the grease. He was enjoying the way the conversation moved around him, letting him sit in peace. But he swore, he felt a prickle on the back of his neck, unprovoked and sharp. Like a thin wire had been pulled taut inside his spine, making him shiver.

He looked up, eyes drawn to something when he finally saw a figure emerge from the crowd and walking directly toward their table.

He walked with a confidence that Hyunjin could only *dream* of having. His little hips swayed so distractingly in his short, pleated cheer skirt, his legs uncovered and bare and just out for the entire world to see. His hair was falling down past his shoulders in a gorgeous starry blond that seems almost white. And it wasn't until the very end that he realized perhaps what he should have noticed first: the ears and tail.

He was a hybrid. And based on the ears, a kitten hybrid.

Hyunjin felt himself blush all the way up his ears and down his chest. He'd *seen* hybrids before, sure. But it was usually just in passing, on the streets. He'd never gone to school with one. Partially because he'd gone to some pretty small schools in some pretty small towns but also because hybrids were just *rare* nowadays.

His parents had told him that even when they were kids, they'd seen more of them around. They'd played with them in the neighborhood before dark and went to class alongside them. But over the decades, there had been a steady decline. From what Hyunjin could remember, it was simply being bred out.

So here he was, eighteen and seeing his first hybrid, up close and personal and god…it was an understatement to say he was stunned. And it had very little to do with the ears and tail, if he was being honest.

The blond stopped at their table, beaming and doing a little twirl. “Do you like it?” He asked happily.

Jisung gave a loud wolf whistle, standing up to hold his hand and make him twirl again. “Damn Lixie, none of those other bitches are going to look *half* as good as you in that skirt.”

Hyunjin did not know what bitches Jisung spoke of but he whole heartedly agreed.

The blond giggled. “Thanks Jisungie.” He smiled at the table, his eyes pausing on Hyunjin and his smile getting almost a little shy for a split second. And then it was gone, as he dropped down into the empty seat across from him.

“Who do we have here?” He asked, his eyes alight with curiosity and some internal light that had Hyunjin’s eyes drifting to his and latching on.

“I’m Hyunjin.” He said, shocking even himself when he took the initiative but *god,* he wanted him to know his name.

“Hyunjin,” the blond said, his smile soft as he tried the name out. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Felix.”

He reached a preciously small hand across the table and smiled with those strawberry lips and wow, Hyunjin didn’t think he’d ever seen someone so mesmerizing before. His skin was flawless, his makeup subtle and natural but still flirty and fun. He swore, he thought he saw a hint of freckles under his foundation but he quickly pulled his eyes away from the bridge of his nose and extended a hand of his own.

Long fingers tipped in black wrapped around the small, baby pink nails on Felix’s and Hyunjin was hooked. The very image of those soft, smooth hands disappearing inside his felt like a blessing.

He wasn’t entirely sure how he managed to let go but he did, letting that perfect little hand drift back to its owner and take up a bottle of tea.

But the blond kept his eyes on Hyunjin as the table continued on around them. He smiled and leaned forward. “Okay, so be honest. Worst class so far?”

“Calculus.” He said immediately. That was an easy question, one he didn’t even have to think about.

Felix nodded. “I get that. Well, if you need any help, Minho is really good at math and I’m sure he’d be willing to tutor you.” A teasing little smirk bloomed on his face before he added. “I’d offer myself but you deserve better than that.”

Hyunjin felt a little blush crop up on his cheeks, not sure how he was supposed to take that because *surely,* he wasn’t flirting. That would be absurd and conceited of him to even *consider.*

But Felix could talk enough for the two of them, it seemed because he only leaned forward even more and gave Hyunjin a conspiratorial look. “So,” he said under his breath, “What did you do to get called to the office on the first day?”

And just like that, Hyunjin felt his heart deflate like a balloon. He should have known that Felix would assume he’d done something bad. Everyone else did. And sure, Felix sure didn’t *look* like everyone else, but that didn’t automatically mean he wasn’t passing the same judgement.

He shouldn’t have been surprised and, honestly, he wasn’t. He was more surprised by how much it hurt to think that Felix saw him as some troublemaker. Someone who was so far from who he really was.

For the first time in so long, Hyunjin didn’t want to stay quiet and just let him assume. He wanted to be *seen.* He wanted to correct him, to explain that he just liked wearing hardware in his face and dark, moody colors. He wanted to explain that the boots and leather jacket were the safest things to wear when riding his motorcycle. Hell, he wanted to explain *why* he let everyone believe whatever they wanted, to tell him all about the teasing when he was little and constantly having the title of new kid and what that did to someone, to *him,* over the years.

But Hyunjin wasn’t sure he could string together that many thoughts into a cohesive explanation so he didn’t. He just sighed, eyes dropping to the table and his half eaten pizza. “Nothing. I just…the office needed to give me an updated schedule.”

There was a beat of silence but he didn’t look up. He didn’t want to see a skeptical look on his face.

“Hey, I didn’t-”

The bell tolled and the entire room seemed to rise at once. People raced to throw their trash away and scurry off to their next class. And

Hyunjin was no exception. After all, avoiding people was something he was very good at after all these years.

He mumbled a thank you to Chan when the other boy turned to him and quickly turned on his heel to race away. He heard Changbin call after him but he couldn't make out the words over the din of the student body. He just kept his head down and moved.

Thankfully, he only had three classes left and then he'd be free to go home. And the last one was just a study hall so he shouldn't have to do much. So far, it seemed like his last school had been pretty in sync with this one which meant he wasn't having to fight to catch up nearly as much. Except for that damn calculus class. God, he wished he had the guts to ask that Minho guy for help. He could really use it before he fell too far behind.

So when his last class, study hall, rolled around, he pulled his book out, already dreading the painful slog of trying (and most likely failing) to solve problems and having to consult the back of the book to be *told* that he was indeed wrong. It was not a gratifying feedback loop.

The class had a constant, casual chatter to it and the teacher couldn't seem to care less. He had his feet kicked up on the desk, leaned back, scrolling on his phone.

"Hyunjin! Hi!"

He nearly flinched at the happy voice that sounded off to his side. It was so unexpected to hear someone call his name like that. His head snapped to the side and his heart slammed straight into his ribcage like a car crash upon finding Felix standing next to him, hands behind his back as he rocked on his heels. He was smiling down at Hyunjin, biting his bottom lip and looking almost shy. Which was *ridiculous,* because he looked like *that* and, in Hyunjin's mind, every single person must be legally obligated to be at least a little in love with him.

"H-hi…" He replied, stunned.

The blond mistook his trailing sentence and pointed to his chest. "Felix. Remember? From lunch?"

Was he fucking serious?

"N-no! I remember. Of *course* I remember you." Hyunjin was pretty sure he'd remember this face up until his dying breath but he was

proud of himself for not saying that directly to him.

He watched in amazement as Felix's ears perked up, ever so slightly, like he was pleased. He had zero experience with hybrids and not very much with normal cats either though, so he couldn't be certain.

"Oh." Felix said, a pleased smile blossoming on his face as he looked down to his perfectly white tennis shoes. Hyunjin watched as his fluffy, nearly white tail wrapped gently around his hip, draping around to the front. "Do you mind if I sit here?" He asked quietly, eyes sparkling when he brought them up from the floor.

Hyunjin tried to remind himself that Felix probably thought he was a troublemaker or a drug dealer or some one who had a severe distaste for authority but even that couldn't stop him from nodding his head and motioning to the empty seat next to him.

Felix smiled and sat. He dumped his backpack on the ground and Hyunjin heard the way it jingled and crashed, the entire thing covered in keychains. One immediately caught his eye.

"Oh, I like the teddy bear keychain." He said, his eyes glued to it. It was one of the lamer things he could have said but oh well, the damage had already been done.

The blond's ear perked up and he sat up straighter, hoisting his backpack back into his lap. "Thank you! I just got it! It was a present from Jisungie! This one was from Channie last year." He excitedly said, pointing to a little heart plush covered in pink fluff. "Oh and then this one I made out of clay, but the ear got broken off some time last year. But it's still cute, right?" He asked, pointing to a little purple kitten that was lumpy and misshapen and made with so much love.

"Super cute." Hyunjin mumbled. He listened as the blond gave him the full tour, explaining each keychain and who it was from and odd little bits of lore about each one. His voice was hypnotic to listen to; deep and smooth and expressive. Hyunjin thought he could sit and listen to an entire lecture on literally any subject if Felix was the one giving it.

He listened silently, nodding his head to make sure Felix knew he was listening. He felt a small smile paint itself on his lips and he had to admit, it was rare for him to wear one of these around other people. Normally, he was too consumed with anxiety and wondering what was next to smile. But for as nervous as Felix's beauty and presence made him, something about him was also so warm. He felt like

sunshine, with the way he smiled like it didn't cost him anything. Like he didn't even have to think about it. Like it was just his default.

"But I think my current obsession is teddy bears so I'm hoping to get some more keychains like the one Jisungie got me." He said, finally wrapping up the tour. He set his backpack back on the floor and blushed a little. "Sorry, I didn't mean to talk your ear off about my keychain addiction."

Hyunjin smiled. It was sort of nice to know that he wasn't the only one who felt a little awkward. "It's okay. I liked it. It's an interesting way to get to know someone." He mused.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Like…I now know you like teddy bears."

Felix giggled and the sound gave Hyunjin enough adrenaline to push on.

"And, I can tell your friends really love you. Because they see these little things and think of you and get them for you. And I can tell that you really love them too, because every single one holds a special place in your heart." He cringed a little, wondering if he was getting too sappy. But when he glanced up from his blunt, black fingernails, he found Felix with his chin tipped into his hand and staring back at Hyunjin with light eyes and a soft smile. Just listening. Hyunjin couldn't sense a second of judgement from him.

"I can tell that you like cute things. But you don't mind if they get a little beat up or broken, like the kitten one you made. They don't lose all value if they aren't perfect. Oh, and speaking of the kitten one, you *made* that. Which means you're probably kind of creative or at least like crafts or something. Which is really cool. And…yeah." He finally ran out of things to say, his voice almost feeling strained with how much he'd just said. He couldn't tell you the last time he'd said that much to a stranger.

Feeling a bit too bare, a bit too out in the open, he lifted his eyes from where they'd fallen to the scratched up desk and glanced at Felix only to find the blond looking at him with wide brown eyes.

"You got all that from some keychains?" He said finally, a little stunned laugh bubbling out of him.

Hyunjin blushed and ducked his head, feeling a little embarrassed.

“That’s so sweet,” Felix said quietly, looking bashfully down at his own desk. He watched in sheer amazement as the blond lifted his eyes, a blush high on his cheeks as he found Hyunjin’s eyes. “So… what’s an interesting way to get to know *you*?”

Hyunjin was pretty sure his soul left his body in that moment. Because surely, Felix wasn’t *flirting,* right? Was he really so delusional as to think a cute guy being nice to him would imply anything romantic? It was so beyond the realm of possibility that Hyunjin chuckled nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. “I uh, I don’t know. I’m not very interesting really.”

“Oh, I *highly* doubt that.” Felix said immediately, scooting his chair a bit closer. “Come on. Tell me something about you. Something no one else knows.”

Hyunjin squirmed a little under that kind, intense stare. What was that supposed to mean? Share what? What a big loser he really was?

But Felix was looking at him with wide, open eyes and he just wanted him to keep looking. So he admitted something safe. Something easy. “I paint my own nails. I uh…I even like to do little designs sometimes.”

The blond’s eyes widened impossibly. “Really? I want to see! Do you have any pictures?”

Hyunjin nodded, shyly pulling out his phone and scrolling back through his endless photos of flowers and sunsets and street signs and old brick walls that looked so lonely in the cool light of evening. Pictures of vibrant red skies, foretelling impending storms and an old couple sitting on a bench together. God, he took a lot of pictures, didn’t he?

He showed Felix a few of the designs he’d done recently. One of little silver stars and one had a delicate checkered pattern that had taken him *hours* to finish. Each and every one with a black base to ensure it would match his wardrobe.

Felix oo’d and awed, seeming genuinely impressed. He asked about Hyunjin’s techniques and how he learned and they even ended up watching a muted tutorial on Hyunjin’s phone of one of his favorite nail artist youtubers.

And just as he was starting to get to last summer’s nail photos, the bell rang and the school day was over. And for the first time in Hyunjin’s

entire life, he was almost disappointed that the day was over. That he had to go home.

It was such a foreign feeling that he nearly pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

When he glanced at Felix, he swore he caught a little pout for half a second before the blond smiled at him and pushed his chair back to where it belonged. When had he scooted so close? And how had Hyunjin not had a heart attack at the proximity?

Today was fucking weird. Maybe he *did* need to go home.

This time it'll be different.

This time, I'll make friends.

"Well, I hope you're careful riding that motorcycle of your's home." Felix said, slinging his backpack over his shoulder as he stood.

Hyunjin swallowed thickly, his fingers tingling with the want to grab his hand. To keep him for just one more second. To stop the school day from ending.

He really wanted this time to be different, he did.

"Hey, F-Felix?" He said, standing suddenly and grabbing his own bag. He held the strap like a lifeline as the blond paused and looked up at him, giving him his attention.

He took a shuddering breath, hoping the blond didn't hear it. "I'm not…I-I know how I look. I know…I know what people say and assume about me. But I'm not…I'm not like that. I don't…" he trailed off. Not sure how to articulate it. He'd never really tried before. "I don't get in trouble. I'm not mean. I don't sell drugs. I don't get in fights. I just…"

Felix was looking at him with the ghost of a smile on his lips. His eyes were dancing all over Hyunjin's face like he was reading every word he couldn't find.

"So…the buzz cut?" He asked.

Hyunjin shrugged. "It's just…I thought it would look cool."

Felix nodded, thinking. "And the safety pins in your ears?"

“I went through a punk phase in middle school and didn’t have anything else to pierce them with.”

Felix giggled a little at that and Hyunjin felt a bubble of hope in his chest.

“What about the motorcycle?”

“It gets good gas mileage.” He said simply.

And the blond’s smile cracked wide open. He laughed, eyes sparkling. “Oh my god, you’re *adorable.”* He cooed, eyes simmering with something that looked dangerously like affection.

Hyunjin felt that pesky blush flood his cheeks again and he really, *really* wished that would stop happening.

But he wasn’t the only one. Because Felix, cheeks tinged pink, was looking up through his lashes at him. His fingers were gently petting the fur on his tail as it wrapped around him, almost like he didn’t really realize he was doing it. “I’m sorry if what I said earlier at lunch offended you. I really didn’t mean it like that.”

Hyunjin remembered the sinking feeling in his stomach when Felix had asked what he’d done to be called to the office. When Hyunjin had thought that he just saw him like everyone else did; a no good kid with ill intent.

“It’s okay.” Hyunjin said. “I know everyone must have thought the same thing when they called me over the intercom.”

Felix frowned. “Sure but…I don’t care what everyone else thinks.” His frown softened as he looked up at Hyunjin with a confused sort of softness in his eyes. “I care that it hurt you. And I’m sorry.”

This time, it’ll be different.

This time, I’ll make friends.

Hyunjin looked back at Felix and for just a moment, he let himself fall a little into those eyes. They were wide open, after all. Unguarded and unmonitored and totally open for the dive.

“I…thank you.” Hyunjin said quietly. He wasn’t sure if it was the appropriate response but he appreciated it and Felix seemed to accept it. He nodded before finally looking away and giggling.

When Hyunjin looked around too, he was shocked to find the room empty. How long had they been standing here? Even the disinterested teacher had left.

“Shit, I’m late for practice! I’ll uh…I’ll see you tomorrow? Same time, same place?” Felix asked, already heading for the door.

“Y-yeah.” Hyunjin replied.

Felix smiled wide. “Save me a seat then!” And with that, he slipped out of the room, racing towards cheer practice.

Hyunjin stood there, staring after him.

This time, it’ll be different.

This time, I’ll fall in love.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Welcome back and happy Sunday! ❤□□ I cannot even BEGIN to thank you enough for all of the love and support you poured into the comments on the first chapter. Not just for this silly little story but also for me ❤□□ Thank you so, so much. Your kind words were so healing and helpful, I can't even describe it. Now who's ready to watch Hyunjin fall even deeper into hopeless, embarrassing, yearning love (feat. Hyunjin's diary)??? LET'S GO!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The motorcycle rumbling to life under him was soothing. Never in his life would he have thought he'd truly enjoy something as dangerous and reckless as riding a motorcycle but it was perhaps the one time he really felt free. Even as he watched the people in the school lot turn to eyeball him, he could feel the stares falling off him as he rode out of the lot and down the street.

He rode home, pushing the speed a little bit just to clear his head. Just to try to burn off some of the lingering anxiety of first day jitters and big brown eyes that fucking *sparkled* when they looked at you.

All things considered, today had been…good.

Sure, people had still largely avoided him like the plague, but he'd also had a place to sit at lunch. A table filled with seemingly nice people. And even if it was just a pity invite from an overly helpful student class president, it didn't detract from Hyunjin's gratitude.

And Felix. Wow, yeah he…he wasn't quite sure how to process him yet. He was pretty sure a mere mortal would *never* be able to process such enigmatic beauty, no matter how much time was afforded. But his beauty aside, there was everything else about him that was equally captivating. He listened like he really cared. He asked questions and freely answered when asked in return. So much about him felt carefree and open but then there was that bashful side too. The side of him that looked down at his desk and bit his lip and had Hyunjin thinking crazy thoughts and wondering what the blond could possibly be thinking.

He rode home in a daze, mind constantly drifting towards a small

blond and how he'd moved his chair closer as they talked.

He finally pulled up to his house, shutting off the engine and dismounting. He pulled his helmet off, tucking it under his arm and walking into the new house.

They'd moved in at the beginning of summer break so the place was mostly unpacked. Not fully, but they never really unpacked all the way, to be fair. After so many years of moving, they'd learned to just keep some things in boxes perpetually. What was the point of hanging art on the walls when you'd just have to fill the holes in the plaster a few months later? What was the point of painting the living room when the realtor would just make you paint it a clinical gray before selling it?

But that wasn't to say the place wasn't without personality. Hyunjin's mom was too much of a homemaker, ironically enough, to let it sit in sterile silence. She did what she could, making sure Hyunjin's art still ended up on the fridge even though he whined he was too old for it. There was that creepy ceramic cat they kept by the guest book that no one ever signed that had followed them from house to house. And no matter how much Hyunjin thought those blue eyes followed you whenever you walked past, he had to admit that having *one* constant thing in his life - even if it was a possibly possessed ceramic cat - was sort of nice. They lugged the same couch and armchairs with them to every house, every apartment. Sometimes they fit, sometimes they didn't but it was okay because it was *theirs*.

So while it was a new house, one he knew he might not live in very long, it still felt a little bit like home, if he allowed it too. And today, he was feeling generous. So he wiped his feet on the grimy welcome mat and opened the front door.

"Jinnie?" His mom called from down the hall, as if it could be anyone else. His dad wouldn't be off work for another hour or two at the least.

"Hey mom," He called, slipping off his shoes and padding to the kitchen where he could already smell dinner cooking. Sure enough, his mom had the lid lifted on a crockpot, stirring whatever soup she had crafted inside. "It's not even cold enough for soup yet," Hyunjin joked, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge.

His mom flattened her lips, giving him a gentle glare. "Hush. It's never too warm for soup, I raised you better than this."

He chuckled and started to make his way towards his room when his mom called out, “Wait! How was the first day, Bambi?”

God, his mom had asked him this question so many times in their lives. Way more than most parents had to. And he knew it was just part of the script, part of what any caring, interested, concerned parent would do. But he hated lying to her face. He hated throwing a fake smile on and saying it was good when it hadn’t been. When he hadn’t said a word all day because not a single person had tried to talk to him. When he’d felt their glares and stares sliding all over his back, taking in the leather and ripped jeans and labeling him with words that were harsh and untrue but being too afraid to correct them because it was better than being labeled soft and weak and sensitive.

He knew his mom knew, he did. He never brought friends home, never even mentioned any. And he knew that she worried. So even though he lied and she didn’t push, it wasn’t like it was a big secret.

He used flat words like *fine* or *whatever* or sometimes just a shrug. But today? Today, he tried a new one. “It…wasn’t bad?” He said slowly, tentatively. The words felt odd on his tongue but they didn’t taste untrue.

His mom froze, eyes widening. She looked like she wanted to ask a million and one questions but he loved her more than ever when she bit her lip and simply said, “Good. I’m glad.” She was hardly holding in her smile. “Now, why don’t you get washed up and start on homework. Dinner will be ready in an hour or so.”

Hyunjin nodded, turning and fleeing to his room.

He really should get a head start on this fucking calculus homework but instead, he closed his door softly, shrugging his backpack off and pulled a journal from the bottom drawer of his desk.

Today had been so much, he didn’t want to wait until the end of his day. So he changed into a pair of comfy sweats and his favorite hoodie and settled at his desk, pencil poised and ready.

*****

Deary Diary,

Holy shit.

I'm in love.

At least, I think I am. I've never been in love before so I can't really be sure.

His name is Felix and he's a cheerleader and he's the most beautiful person to have ever walked this earth. I don't care who's come before and who will come after, I'm certain he'll hold this title for all of eternity.

But it's not just his face. Or his body. Or his smile or his eyes or the fact that I'm pretty sure he has freckles hiding under his makeup. It's more than that. HE is more than that.

He's so open and talkative and I'm just sure that every single person he meets loves him. He probably has like a hundred friends or something. And still, he decided to sit next to ME in study hall. ME! The new kid. The kid he hardly knows and he talked so much, like wow. He has so many keychains and they're all things like unicorns and cupcakes and sparkly pink hearts and stuff but it's just so adorable. He was so excited to show them all to me, like he'd been DYING to show them off or something. And it was so sweet too, because a lot of them were from his million and one friends. You could really tell how much they love him but I really hope none of them love him like I might. Because I think I would die a little bit if he had a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend. Or anything more than a friend.

He probably does though. It's impossible for a guy like that to be unattached. But wow…even just sitting next to him and listening to him talk is enough for me.

He told me to save a seat for him in study hall tomorrow.

Not that anyone else will try to take that seat but if they did? I would physically remove them to make sure he could sit there.

He's pure sunshine and I just want to feel him shine on me a little bit longer.

*****

Hyunjin breathed out a sigh of relief, feeling a bit better now that it was out and on the page. He still felt the jittery energy zinging through his blood, almost like he'd confessed to the man himself.

He carefully stored his diary away and pulled his dreaded calculus book out again to begin the painful process of perpetual failure. He diligently kept his nose buried in his work until his mom called him down for dinner.

He clomped down the stairs, feeling a bit dejected but his mood lifted when he saw his dad's shoes by the front door.

His dad, while a hard worker who was successfully building his career, had always prioritized family. He did his best to be home for dinner every night and had taken the time and care to come up with little projects for him and Hyunjin to do, like rebuilding the motorcycle. Hyunjin really didn't know how he managed it all but he was grateful for it.

"Hey Hyunnie! How was the first day?"

He smiled as he sat down at the table, steamed pork dumplings resting in the middle with a myriad of side dishes, including the soup he'd seen his mom working on earlier. "It was fine." He said quietly.

"Did you hear that, Jun-ho? It was *fine."* His mom said, eyes alight and curious. He could tell she was hungry for more details but he wasn't even really sure what he could tell her that wouldn't sound utterly pathetic.

"*Fine.*" She said again. "Not a shrug, not a grumble but a *word.* Fine." She said it like it was her new favorite word.

Hyunjin rolled his eyes carefully, equal parts amused and embarrassed. "Mom…" He whined quietly.

"So what was so *fine* about it?" His dad asked, eyebrows raised as he carefully dipped his dumpling in a shallow dish of chili oil.

Hyunjin shrugged, looking down at his food, feeling suddenly shy. He was normally a bit more relaxed at home, his parents the only people he knew well enough to truly let his guard down around. But he wasn't quite sure how to explain what today had been like. "It was just…different. I guess." He said slowly.

He knew his parents knew he didn't have friends. It was this common

knowledge that they just never really spoke about out loud. But he knew they knew. And he knew they worried. So even though it was embarrassing, he cleared his throat and added, “I uh…I sat with some guys at lunch. They seemed nice.”

He glanced up to find his mom, staring at him with wide, hopeful eyes and his dad, dumpling suspended halfway between the table and his open mouth, like he was utterly shocked by what his son had just said.

“The office had the class president show me around and he invited me to sit with him and some of his friends.”

“And you said yes?” His mom asked.

He nodded even though it wasn’t *technically* the truth. Chan had just sort of *steered* him to the table and he hadn’t said no.

“What were they like? What are their names? Are you going to sit with them tomorrow?” His mom was sitting up straight, elbows on the table - even though she *always* told Hyunjin not to do that - and leaned forward. Her eyes were on *fire.*

There were too many questions so Hyunjin just offered one of his famous shrugs. He swore he had about a thousand of them and his parents had become quite adept at reading them over the years.

“They were nice,” he said again, “But I don’t know if I’ll sit there tomorrow.”

“Why not?” His mom asked, lips turning into a little frown.

“Because I mean…it’s the student council president. His *job* is to be welcoming. I wouldn’t want to take advantage of that.”

“Hyunnie,” His mom cooed, looking almost sad. “I’m sure he doesn’t invite *every* new student to sit with him and his friends.”

But he’d asked Binnie, who’d been the new kid last year. What if this Chan guy just collected strays? Honestly, Hyunjin should probably just be thankful if that was the case but he didn’t like to think that his first real friends would be won on a technicality or some weird honor code that Chan lived by.

Hyunjin didn’t often entertain the idea but…if he *did* have friends, he’d want them to like him for *him.* The *real* him. The guy under the

black nails and piercings and grungy clothes. He'd want friends that knew him and accepted him. And logically, he knew that wasn't a lot to ask. In fact, it was probably the bare minimum. But it felt sort of impossible most of the time.

He shrugged again, taking a bite of food to avoid saying more.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before his dad quietly said, "If they seem like nice guys, and you think you might like their company…just, don't give up, Hyunnie."

Hyunjin looked up from his plate, seeing his dad's kind eyes looking back at him.

"You're a good kid and you deserve to have good friends."

"And a cute boyfriend." His mom added quickly with a smirk.

Hyunjin groaned, letting his forehead drop to the table with a thunk.

*****

The next day, he got out of bed after hours of tossing and turning. He'd hardly been able to get any sleep, visions of a blond in a too short skirt running around and around his head. So, with a groan, he'd rolled his tired body out of bed and slid on a pair of shorts and running shoes.

He didn't run often but sometimes, it was the best way to clear his head. He shot a text to his sleeping parents so if they woke and found him gone, they wouldn't call the police.

He slipped out into the chilly early autumn air and took a deep breath, trying to flush everything out. The good, the bad, the nerves, *everything.*

He started off at a light, easy pace. He focused on how his feet hit the pavement, one after another after another, a never ending rhythm that could carry him forever if he wanted. He'd spent some time exploring the town this way over the summer, figuring it was a good way to learn the new surroundings and also try to beat the impending nerves of another new school into submission.

It had partially worked. He could now find his way around town pretty seamlessly but he'd still gone to school yesterday with a stomach full of nervous butterflies.

The romantic in him wanted to believe it was because his soul *knew* that Felix would be there. But the realist part of him thought the romantic was a total sap and should be shot on sight.

He huffed out a breath and pushed himself a little faster. It didn't matter how he felt about Felix. It didn't matter if he really did *actually* love him. He was completely unattainable and, chances were, a guy like that probably already had a significant other. Sure, he seemed nice and had given Hyunjin the time of day but that didn't have to mean *anything*.

It wasn't really like him to overreact to things like this. Hell, it wasn't even really like him to *crush* on someone. But then again, he'd never run into a Felix before.

He meandered his way home, along all the side streets and crumbling sidewalks he knew, taking wrong turns and long detours until the sun was finally catching up to him and he knew it was time to shower and get to school.

By the time he got home, his parents were up and moving around, his dad with briefcase in hand and a gentle smile for him. He patted his sweaty shoulder and was out the door. Hyunjin got himself cleaned up, throwing on a pair of cargo jeans and a thin long sleeve shirt. He tossed a flannel over it, knowing that every school he'd ever been to tended to run cold and topped it off with his leather jacket. It was too warm for this many layers but the jacket was more for safety than anything.

The rode to school, feeling an odd sense of unease in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't the normal kind: that sort of foreboding dread that came with a new school day. It was different. A little bit lighter. A bit more hopeful, perhaps.

He rolled into the lot, parking carefully and trying his best to ignore the stares and whispers behind obvious hands. He pulled his helmet off, tucking it under his long arm and walked his way into the school.

He made it to his locker without having to use the map but stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the person standing right beside it.

Dressed in a pleated denim skirt and chunky, cherry red sweater, was

Felix. He was crouched down carefully, rummaging around in the locker underneath Hyunjin's.

No fucking way.

Was Felix's locker right under his? Was *that* what Chan meant when he'd said Hyunjin's locker was right over one of his friend's?

"Hyune!"

The taller man jerked violently back to reality. He'd been planted firmly in the middle of the fucking hallway like a stone splitting the stream of students. With a few rapid blinks he unstuck his feet from the scuffed tiles and made his way forward.

"Hyune, good morning!" Felix chirped, still crouched down and riffling through his mess of a locker. It was day two; how was it already so messy?

"H-hey Felix. Good morning." He said back, having to clear his throat twice just to get the words out.

The blond had his tail wrapped around himself protectively, probably nervous of it getting stepped on in the busy hallway. He looked up at Hyunjin, watching him linger and it was like he could *see* the lightbulb go off over his head.

"Wait! Is your locker by mine?"

Hyunjin nodded sheepishly, fiddling with the strap of his backpack. "Yeah. Right above it, actually."

The kitten *beamed* at him like the news had just made his day. "Well don't let me stop you! I'm trying to find my favorite pen so it could take awhile." He giggled.

"Oh I uh, I don't want to crowd you." He thought of that fluffy tail and knew he'd never forgive himself if his big feet ever accidentally stepped on it.

But the blond seemed less concerned and swatted the words away. "Don't worry about it; I'm small. There's room for both of us." With that, he turned back to his open locker and nearly dove inside, rummaging around endless books and papers, the odd occasional jingle tinkling out, making Hyunjin wonder what on *earth* Felix had squirreled away in there.

With a deep breath, he walked closer, leaning over Felix awkwardly and trying to keep plenty of space between them while also reaching his locker. It resulted in him standing with feet shoulder width apart, leaving room for Felix between.

He fumbled the combination once but was able to rally his thoughts away from the kitten hybrid *underneath him* and back on the job at hand. He popped it open, quickly unloading a few of his books before they broke his spine in half. Did teachers think they were pack mules? Why would it *ever* be okay to let a newly appointed adult carry that much weight on their backs? At this rate, he was going to need reimbursement from the district to pay for his chiropractic needs.

But just as he was about to close his locker, he saw the pointy tips of fluffy ears enter his lower field of vision. Confused, he looked down to find Felix, having slowly stood up to peek inside Hyunjin's locker. This had left him pinned between Hyunjin and the wall and while Hyunjin was busy trying to fight the swimming in his head because *holy shit he smelled like peaches,* Felix seemed utterly *fascinated* by the empty void that was Hyunjin's new locker.

"*Felix!"* Hyunjin squeaked, completely unsure what he was supposed to do in this situation. "What a-are you doing?"

The blond was gripping the bottom edge of Hyunjin's locker, looking every bit the curious kitten as he poked his head inside to get a better look. "I wanted to see how you decorated your locker." He said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"D-decorate my locker?" He understood the words, in theory but nothing really made sense with Felix's body wedged so close to his.

The blond nodded and twisted to look over his shoulder at Hyunjin. "Yeah, but you haven't added *anything.*" The blond pouted, like the thought really saddened him. And Hyunjin was fully willing and ready to offer to decorate his locker with a mural of his own blood if it would make Felix not look sad when the blond perked up. His ears stood tall, looking excited as he smiled wide.

"Wait! I have an idea!" He sunk back down, nearly crawling back into his locker and quickly sliding back up with a little scrap of paper in hand. "Here!" He said proudly, slapping it on the inside of Hyunjin's locker door and holding it with a little flower magnet.

It was a wallet sized school picture of Felix himself. His smile was wide and beaming, the very tips of his ears cut off in the frame.

Hyunjin gawked at it, feeling suddenly like he'd been gifted the most prized work of art on the planet. "Why do you just have these on hand?"

The blond scoffed. "Because! I look super cute in those pictures, don't I?"

And that was a question that brushed a vivid blush all over his cheeks. But he nodded because seriously, denying it would be probably as bad if not worse than a war crime. "Super cute." He whispered, fighting the urge to reach out a finger and stroke that smiling face in the photo.

He heard Felix giggle and finally came back to his senses. He took a large step back, giving the blond room to breath and instantly missing his warmth. Felix was sunshine. Pure sunshine. And Hyunjin wondered if he could grow under that light. If he could flourish and become some better, brighter version of himself if he just drenched himself in that golden, sunny light.

The bell rang and Hyunjin took a deep breath, looking towards Felix and summoning every ounce of courage he had. "See you at lunch?"

Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes.

"You better." He said sassily before giving him a soft smile and turning to leave for class.

Hyunjin wanted to offer to walk him to his class. He wanted to offer to carry his books. He wanted to offer to let Felix step on him. But he held back because he could hardly talk to normal people, let alone a living, breathing angel.

He watched Felix walk away, his hips swaying and his tail still held close.

He finally dragged himself away from his post at the lockers and made his way to class himself. But as fate would have it, he didn't have to wait until lunch to see Felix again. Because he showed up in his fourth hour calculus class, much to Hyunjin delight and horror.

Delight because he got to *watch* as the blond's eyes lit up upon seeing him sitting in class. Horror because he would have preferred to not share his weakest subject with the love of his life and show off how utterly inept he was as solving for x.

So perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that there were no open seats next to Hyunjin and Felix was placed across the room. However, this also meant that Hyunjin's attention was pulled even further from the white board and the lesson.

He could almost *taste* the failing grade he would be getting in this class. But it wasn't his *fault* that his teacher was some nice middle aged man who had a dull, droning voice and was currently fighting a five foot nothing kitten hybrid in a short dress for Hyunjin's attention.

He really did try his hardest to focus on the lesson, knowing that he really needed to get his act together because the year had *just* started and he was already hopelessly lost. But he'd catch his mind wandering toward soft ears and big brown eyes and he'd find himself shamelessly staring at the blond across the room. He would mentally curse himself, straighten his posture and resolutely look back to the front of the class…for a whole 5 minutes and then he would find himself glancing away again.

The blond sat with his heeled feet hovering a millimeter off the floor, sparkly blue pen clutched in a deathgrip. He furiously took notes, little pink tongue sticking out the corner of his lips in the most distracting way. His ears twitched occasionally, perhaps disturbed by the breeze of the vent right over his desk or maybe just trying to pick up the teacher's low voice.

His tail was wrapped loosely around his bare leg, the tip of it slowly swaying back and forth. He wondered if Felix did that on purpose or if it just had a mind of its own. Did it wrap around him for protection? Or was it just a way to keep it out of the way of others?

"Mr. Hwang?"

Startled, he jumped in his seat, eyes going wide as he saw the teacher looking at him with a slightly amused look. "Eyes up front, okay? The lesson is up here, not across the room."

He was sure he would have blushed if he didn't feel like he'd just passed away instead. It was hard to blush when you were *dead.*

He kept his eyes on the board the rest of class, even if his mind was still across the room, wondering what kinds of doodles Felix would decorate his notes with. Did his equations dance with stars and clouds? Did he surround his graphs with hearts and, more importantly, was anyone's *name* in those hearts? Or were they blank and waiting? Available. Ready to have an arrow shot straight

through?

Thankfully, the bell rang and Hyunjin was once again ripped from his ridiculous musings. He stood, slowly packing his bag and feeling the anxiety of the impending lunch starting to creep back into his bones. If he showed up at the table today, would he be asked to sit down with a smile like yesterday? Or would there be that sort of sidelong glance between every, wondering why the weird new kid thought he could just join them like he actually belonged.

He swallowed thickly, zipping up his backpack and throwing it over his shoulder only to find Felix waiting by the door. His backpack was on and nearly as big as he was. He had the straps grasped firmly in his little fingers and was staring *straight* at Hyunjin. When he found the taller man finally looking at him, he broke into a wide smile.

“Come on, Hyune! Let’s go get lunch; I’m starving!”

Hyunjin gaped at him, unable to hold the reaction in. And he wasn’t the only one. He swore he *felt* their lingering classmates gasp collectively. He vaguely heard a girl mutter *what the fuck?* Under her breath through the roaring of blood in his ears.

By some miracle, or perhaps just the power of love itself, Hyunjin found himself drifting forward towards the blond and the door to the classroom.

Felix grinned and turned on his heel, leading them out of the room and into the crush of the hallway. He stuck close, not wanting to get separated.

“So *that’s* your worst class so far?” Felix asked, looking up at Hyunjin with that same sweet smile.

He nodded. It was no use denying it. After all, he’d already told Felix as much yesterday. “I just don’t like math.” He said lamely.

But Felix nodded with great sympathy. “I get that. I’m telling you, you should ask Minho for some help. He’s basically a genius at that stuff.”

Hyunjin nodded, wondering if he really did need to pluck up the courage to ask. It was either that or flunk, he really didn’t see another option.

“So uh…how come I didn’t see you in class yesterday?” He asked.

The smile on Felix's face faltered ever so slightly. It honestly could have just been a trick of the light. But Hyunjin saw the way Felix's ears flattened ever so slightly, the way his tail seemed to wrap even tighter around his body.

"Just…had some trouble with my other class."

"Trouble?" He didn't like the sound of that.

Felix chanced a glance up at Hyunjin as the student body slowed to a crawl, everyone trying to funnel into the cafeteria. Hyunjin shyly looked back, not sure what the blond wanted to see but wanting to offer whatever he had.

After a beat, the blond tipped his head back and sighed dramatically. "I…look, I *know* it's stupid but…someone pulled my tail." He peaked up at Hyunjin like he was expecting the taller boy to roll his eyes. But how could he? That sounded awful.

"They…pulled your tail?"

Felix nodded, eyes sullen and ears drooping a little. "Yeah. He's just… he's been doing it since we were in kindergarten and he thinks it's funny but…" He ended it off with a shrug.

"But it's not funny." Hyunjin finished for him.

He watched as the blond released his straps to reach down his tail, gripping it securely in his little fists like he wanted to hold it close and never let anyone touch it again. And god, Hyunjin's heart *ached.*

The blond shook his head. "No, it's not."

They made their way into line, sliding their trays along the counter as they chose big salads for their lunches and made their way to pay.

"Have you told him to stop it?"

The blond snorted. "Only about a million times. But it never changes anything."

"Do…do you have a lot of issues with that? People pulling your tail or, I dunno, your ears or something?"

"Not so much anymore. When we were younger, sure. All the time. But now people just leave me alone and gawk from afar." He didn't say it with the poison Hyunjin thought those words deserved. He said

it like it was just a matter of fact.

He wondered if Felix ever felt like an animal in a zoo.

An animal in a cage.

Or perhaps, just an animal who wasn't quite human, but a human who wasn't quite an animal either. He lay in between, blending and blurring the lines and suddenly, Hyunjin felt that little pit of loneliness in his chest opening up, reaching out, finding kinship.

He could be so off base. He could be totally wrong. Perhaps Felix liked the attention. Or perhaps it was a whole hell of a lot more complicated than that.

But what if Felix was like him? What if the world saw one thing when really, he was someone totally different underneath it all.

"Maybe he's just flirting. Ya know, because you're so cute."

Hyunjin watched in awe as Felix's fluffy ears perked up, his eyes widening like he'd opened a truly magnificent gift. He looked up at Hyunjin, mouth in a perfect little circle like he was pleasantly surprised.

And so was Hyunjin. He wasn't sure if it was confidence or if he'd just experienced some kind of momentary blackout but all he'd known was that he wanted Felix to know that he was willing to see him. If he wanted. And, to do that, he had to be willing to offer the same.

He watched in utter amazement as a slow blush painted Felix's cheeks. He bit the inside of his lip and playfully bumped shoulders with Hyunjin. "*Okay,* I didn't know you were so smooth."

Hyunjin couldn't hold in his scoff. "Oh, I'm not. I *promise."*

Felix's laugh was deep and rumbly and soft and it nearly got lost in the loudness of the cafeteria as they wove their way through the tables to their own.

With the blond by his side, Hyunjin was able to approach the table full of peers with a much less foreboding feeling. Sure, he still felt like he was on the doorstep of cardiac arrest but he was still able to pull out a thin, only slightly wobbly smile when Chan looked up and smiled with all his teeth.

“Ay! There they are!” His eyes were shining and perhaps it was just a trick of the light but Hyunjin swore he almost saw a hint of relief in those dark eyes.

Had he been worried that Hyunjin wouldn’t show up?

He shook his head subtly, hoping it would physically dislodge those crazy thoughts from his head. It was one thing to be tentatively hopeful and another to be certifiably insane and he was trying his hardest to walk the line between them.

“You two walk together?” Minho asked, eyebrow raised but face otherwise blank.

Felix nodded heartily with a bright smile as he viciously stabbed his salad. “Yup! I’m in Hyune’s calculus class now!”

His eyes flicked up as he gave Hyunjin a tiny smile that lit his soul on fire and tugged at the corner of his own lips. Felix was like a drug. Or at least, he assumed so. Despite his outward appearance, he had zero experience in things like that. Once, when he’d been really young, his uncle had asked him to hold his cigarette while he ran inside and Hyunjin had ended up crying, convinced he’d get in trouble or inhale enough second hand smoke to die on the spot.

Jisung leaned forward, peering across Minho to look at the blond quizzically. “But I thought your fourth hour was geology?”

“It was, but I dropped it. Switched to calculus instead.”

“Why?” Changbin piped up, greasy burger dripping from between his fingers.

The blond merely rolled his eyes and stabbed his salad again like it owed him money. “Be*cause,*” He said sassily. “Ho-Jin still hasn’t learned to keep his hands to himself.”

“Seriously?” Chan said, brow furrowed in something like exhausted confusion. “Is he *still* giving you a hard time?”

Felix nodded, “Pulled my tail.”

Hyunjin watched as the blond’s tail wound tightly around him. It was almost like it was trying to give him a hug.Trying to comfort him or assure him that it was okay.

Seungmin and Minho rolled their eyes in an almost identical fashion but it was Jeongin, dimples flattened out and looking *very* unamused, who said, “Do we need to talk to him?”

“Again?” Minho added.

Jisung had cheeks full of food but was nodding alone like he was ready to go along with whatever plan his friends had.

But Felix was already shaking his head, swatting the air in front of him and dismissing the idea. “Don’t worry about it. I love you guys but you’ve been telling him to leave me alone since elementary school and *clearly* he’s not willing to listen.” He let out a long sigh before his eyes flicked back over to Hyunjin and a little smile blossomed. “But it’s fine because I have a class with Hyune now.”

The brunette felt his cheeks heating up but he felt a rush of pride roll through him too. “And no one will mess with you with me around.” If his entirely undeserved reputation could help with this, he’d gladly let it.

“Yeah, you and your fuel efficient motorcycle.” Felix said under his breath, eyes alight with static and pulling a giggle from Hyunjin as he ducked his head.

God, it felt so good to be *seen.* He’d always found it so terrifying before but with Felix? With Felix it felt like a giddy little secret.

“Huh?” Jisung said around a mouth of food, brow lowered.

“Nothing.” Felix said quickly, biting his bottom lip and smiling up at Hyunjin through his lashes. God, he was so fucking pretty.

Hyunjin could write *poetry* about the way his hair tumbled down his back. He could write symphonies about how his eyes damn near *glowed* under the pallid light of the fluorescents. He could-

“Oh! Speaking of calculus! Minho, would you be willing to help tutor Hyune?”

Hyunjin’s romantic musings screeched to a halt, the sound of a cat yowling and sirens in the background. “F-Felix,” He stuttered, feeling his heart slam into his ribs like it hadn’t been wearing its seatbelt. Cold fear gripped at his chest but the warmth of Felix’s answering smile helped to soothe him a little.

“Come on, Hyune,” Felix urged, eyes gentle and understanding. “I know you’re worried about that class. And seriously, Minho is a great tutor. And he really doesn’t mind, right Minnie?”

Hyunjin’s terrified eyes swung down the table to see Minho’s stoic face staring down the table back at him. He seemed so calm, cool and collected. Hyunjin bet this guy's heart never tried to jump up and race out of his chest.

Sure enough, Minho casually shrugged. “Not really. I’m busy after school today. But what about tomorrow? Library? After school?”

Hyunjin felt his eyes blow wide. Had it really just been that easy? Had he really just agreed because, what? Because he needed help?

“I-I, are you sure?” Hyunjin asked, gripping his fork so tightly that the plastic was bending, threatening to snap in half. “You really don’t have to. I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

He felt a little nudge to his foot under the table and nearly jumped out of his skin. His eyes flitted back across the table to find a little blond smiling with soft lips and even softer eyes. His eyes were telling him it was okay. They were asking him to calm down.

He blinked and took a deep breath, forcing himself to look back to Minho. He felt another little nudge to his foot, a moment of reassurance. He gripped onto that feeling with all his might.

“I said I don’t mind.” Minho said it so matter of factly. Not snarky or snide. There was no ‘tone’ to it. It was simply stated as a fact that sounded so undeniable when he said it like that. It gave the impression that this guy said what he meant and meant what he said, no alternatives.

Hyunjin could work with that. He preferred straightforward when it came to human interactions. Give him nuance and minutia in a painting and he would eat that shit up. But give it to him in a conversation and he’d be likely to spend the rest of the night ruminating on every word spoken, reading between lines that weren’t even there.

“Okay.” He finally said, giving his best nod and trying to hold his unwavering eye contact.

Minho nodded back and finally turned back to his food.

Hyunjin felt that same little foot nudge his again under the table and he shyly nudged back. He moved slow, afraid that his heavy boot would scuff the blond's heel. He was delighted to hear the little giggle spill from across the table, even as he kept his eyes trained on his half eaten salad.

He focused on finishing his lunch, the nerves still tying up his stomach a little bit but not as bad as it had yesterday.

By the time the bell rang, he'd eaten the entire salad and even managed to not flinch when Changbin clapped him on the shoulder and told him to have a good rest of his day.

What was perhaps even more surprising though was that when Changbin said that, Hyunjin thought it might actually be a little possible. Because his afternoons now consisted of a study hall with the man of his dreams.

And when he walked in, he was delighted to find Felix not only sitting with an empty chair next to him but waving exuberantly like he needed to flag Hyunjin down.

"Jinnie! Over here!" He chirped excitedly, his ears standing straight up, twitching a little to the side in a way that didn't quite match his happy smile. It was subtle and probably not something a normal person would notice. But Hyunjin wasn't normal about Felix; he was mildly obsessed and it was day two.

When those fluffy ears twitched again, flattening out a little, he glanced up and saw the air vent directly over Felix's seat. The last vestiges of summer were still clinging to the days, and the air conditioner was working to keep up.

"Here, take this seat," Hyunjin said, pulling the chair Felix had saved him. He gestured to Felix's chair. "I'll sit there if you're cold."

The blond's eyes blew wide, looking utterly confused and shocked. He cocked his head to the side in an utterly adorable and devastating way. "How…?" He trailed off, even as he gripped the strap of his backpack and started to drag it over to the offered seat.

Hyunjin shrugged, biting his bottom lip. Was it rude to mention? He'd never talked to a hybrid before. He wasn't sure if it was offensive to bring up things like ears or tails. "You just…your ears looked… unhappy." He blushed at his childish words.

But when he chanced a glance up, he saw a soft smile on Felix's face as the blond nodded easily. "You noticed that?"

"Was I not supposed to?"

Felix shook his head, looking utterly fond. "No, it's just…unusual."

Hyunjin felt his blush deepen, a lead weight dropping in his chest. "Yeah." It was probably the most confident answer he'd ever given Felix.

But the shorter man ducked his head, trying to find Hyunjin's eyes to give him a little piece of that intoxicating little smile. "Yeah."

But the way he said it was like it was a good thing. Like it was something that Felix really liked about him. Like maybe it wasn't the worst thing in the world to be a little different.

And when Hyunjin glanced up, curious to see if that message rang true in his eyes as well, it did. He watched with wonder as the blond's little nose scrunched up in delight as he sat back up and added flippantly, "I'm bored of the usual. *Un*usual is much, *much* better."

Hyunjin blinked, stunned at how easily Felix could say things like that. He'd *kill* to have even a sliver of this guy's charm and confidence.

But instead, he just blushed and ducked his head again, going to free that terrible math book from his backpack and attempt to get a head start on his homework.

Felix followed his lead, pulling a pencil case from his bag that was adorned with pins and filled with gel pens. Hyunjin watched from the corner of his eye as the blond carefully selected a color palette of seafoam green, pastel pink and a periwinkle blue. He nodded happily to himself as his tail gave an excited little flick before lazily draping back down. The tip curved up just at the end like it didn't want to touch the floor and once again, Hyunjin had to wonder if Felix was consciously doing that or if his tail did it all on its own.

Would it really be so bad to ask? After all, Felix hadn't seemed to mind him mentioning his ears. In fact, it almost sounded like he *liked* it.

But what would he even ask? He had so many questions but he wasn't sure what was appropriate, what was considered too personal or even

if any of it mattered.

Sure, he was curious but he could personally attest how disheartening it could be when people focused solely on your looks. And he really, *really* didn't want Felix to think he looked at him and only saw an adorable tail and ears. He *also* saw an adorable smile and adorable little button nose and adorable tiny hands tipped in baby pink polish. He saw a man who wore loud colors and loved to laugh and adored his friends. He saw a man that he wanted to know so much more about. And that just *happened* to include the hybrid parts too.

It took nearly ten minutes of hyping himself up and re-reading the same math problem over and over again before he finally forced himself to take a deep breath and look up. Felix was gnawing on the end of his pen, brow furrowed as he worked through some worksheet.

"So uh, ears. And t-tail. You…have them…"

Wonderful. The opening line of the century. It would go down in history as not only the most awkward cold opening to a conversation but also probably his final words because he was pretty sure he was just going to die now.

"I-I-I m-mean-"

He was interrupted by a bubbly giggle from the blond next to him. Felix set his gel pen down and twisted his torso to face Hyunjin. "Yes. I do." He answered simply. "Thank you for noticing," He said with a teasing little smile.

"You're welcome." Stupid. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* "I m-mean, I just…" He broke off with a groan, feeling absolutely deflated. "Sorry. I've just-"

"Never met a hybrid before?" Felix asked.

Hyunjin shook his head.

"And you have questions?" Felix asked, like he was used to this. Like he was working through the same script he'd memorized years ago.

Hyunjin nodded, feeling a weird bubble in his chest. This didn't feel like the same bubbly, open Felix. This seemed rehearsed and commonplace. Like he was simply going through the motions and something about that just didn't sit right with Hyunjin. Because everything he knew about Felix so far was free and light and genuine.

He was natural, bright sunshine and this felt like artificial florescents. They lit up a space but they didn't provide the same warmth.

Felix nodded again, his smile gentle yet clinical. "Alright then listen up. So first, I'm a kitten hybrid. Technically you could also call me a cat hybrid or a feline hybrid, but I prefer kitten, because it's cuter. No, I do not grow claws and no, I do not like catnip. I do not use a litterbox and I do not have to shave off my whiskers. I don't grow any, but I might as I get older."

Hyunjin's mind did the quickest derail when he tried to picture Felix with whiskers but he popped the train right back on the tracks and focused back in before he missed any valuable information.

"I'm just a guy with ears and a tail." He said it with a final little nod of his head, like he was determined for it to be true. "Any questions?" He asked, voice steady and solid.

And yeah, he had one. Something he'd sensed in the blond before when he'd told him about his tail being pulled. When he'd told him that no one talked about it but everyone stared.

"Does it ever get lonely?"

He wondered if Felix ever looked at all the kids in the hallways and felt disconnected like

he did. He wondered what sort of things had happened growing up that wrote this script he was too good at reciting. The one where he justified himself as human. He wondered what parts of him had been hidden away, afraid to be tugged like his tail.

He wondered if Felix felt like he did. Lonely in a school full of people.

The blond blinked at him, eyes wide as he stared back. His ears were alert and pointed, like all his senses were turned on Hyunjin and his question. But the pause wasn't long. It only took another blink before Felix breathed, "Yeah."

They sat, facing one another, books forgotten as the classroom chattered around them. How silly that his peers could chat about club activities or weekend plans when his heart was busy trying to fuse to another person.

"I know what it's like," Hyunjin admitted in a whisper. He startled, shocked he'd said it out loud but unable to pull himself back out of

Felix's eyes. They looked a touch sad at his admission but there were shades of hope in there too. "I-I mean, not exactly, of course. I just…I know what it's like to feel like you have to hide away the parts of yourself that others find different or weird."

He wanted to look away. To *hide.* It was second nature. But he forced himself to hold his eyes because he wanted Felix to know he didn't need to hide, not if he didn't want to. Not if he was tired like Hyunjin was. That if he needed a break, he could take one around Hyunjin.

It was presumptuous and so open-ended but if he was ever going to take a chance and try to open up to anyone, he needed it to be Felix.

The blond's eyes grew softer by the second, melting under his gaze. "What about you? What do you hide away?"

"Everything." The poetry in his backpack. The framed flowers he'd pressed over the summer that he'd never hang. The notebooks upon notebooks of sketches. The watercolor painting of hearts and flowers and wide open chasms that mirrored what he thought the inside of his chest must resemble. The late nights staring at the stars and wondering why he felt so connected to empty dark voids but not his classmates. The silenced part of his heart that *screamed* for someone to *see* him and tell him it was okay that he cried at romcoms and it was okay that he liked sappy ballads and it was *okay* that he believed in love at first sight.

"But…less around you." He said, feeling his heart doing odd little jumps like it wanted Felix to cuddle and hold it.

The blond smiled. He tucked a strand of hair back behind his ear, looking bashful as he whispered, "I'm glad."

Hyunjin tried to give him a little smile but his face was too naked to pull it off. So he wasn't really sure what expression he made but it had Felix biting his bottom lip and whispering, "I purr."

The brunette's mind stalled out, unsure what those words even meant coming from a human. "You…purr?"

The blond's blush darkened and he kept his eyes glued to his desk. It was scratched to hell and engraved with ballpoint pens. There was a sloppy heart he kept tracing with the tip of his finger, carved by fools in love at some point who knew how many years ago now.

"Yeah. I uh…only when I'm tired or really happy. And only at home,

around my parents.” He glanced up, looking nervous and pleading. His hands were clenched into fists on his thighs, his fingers opening and closing subtly. Making nervous biscuits.

How much did he hide away? How much of himself did he lock away to be viewed as normal?

“That’s fucking adorable.” Hyunjin said, surprising himself with his honesty.

But when he watched that pretty pink blush become a bold red, it staved off that lead weight in his stomach that told him he’d gone too far or said too much.

“Yeah well I’m sure my parents disagree.” He giggled, finally looking up even as his index finger continued to trace over and over the heart. “According to them, they can hardly hear the T.V. when I get going,”

Hyunjin giggled, imagining a sleepy Felix curled up on the couch, gripping his tail like a teddy bear and purring like a chainsaw. He would *kill* to witness such a sight.

“So, are your parents hybrids too?”

Felix shook his head. “Nope. My grandpa was but it's pretty common for it to skip a generation. And since he passed away, it's just been me.”

Hyunjin could see that tiny furrow between his brows at those words. He watched him erase it deliberately, like he didn't want to dwell on the loss and the void it had left behind.

“Well, and my uncle.” Felix added. “He married my mom's brother. He's a bunny hybrid though, so it's not totally the same.” he shrugged. “They live really far away too so we only see them maybe once a year.”

Hyunjin nodded. What were the odds that another hybrid had married into Felix's family? A part of him felt grateful for the man he didn't know, simply because perhaps he could offer Felix some community that he clearly lacked.

He watched Felix chew his bottom lip, the tips of his ears starting to droop ever so slightly. He looked sad and Hyunjin got it. It was hard being alone.

“So your friends? Do they know you purr?”

Felix shook his head. “Nope.” He smiled at Hyunjin so cutely it nearly broke him in half. “Just you.”

Just him.

This time it will be different.

“Well, I’m honored.” He said.

He wanted to offer something in return. Some little fact about himself that was harmless but private. He wanted this to be a two way street of sharing secrets. He wanted this to be a *them* thing.

But before he could find something safe, the bell was ringing. He flinched, the noise abrasive and sudden, ripping him from their conversation, their *universe* and hurtling him back into the noisy classroom of kids packing up for the day.

Felix smiled at him like it was the easiest thing in the world.

“Hey so um, the cheer squad is doing a fundraiser on Saturday. Part car wash, part bake sale. You should come.”

Hyunjin wasn’t normally an extra-curricular activities kind of guy. But the thought of getting to see Felix on a weekend was too enticing to pass up. Plus, what was he supposed to say? He was *busy?* He might be an antisocial loser but he wasn’t a *liar.*

“S-sure.” He said, cursing himself mentally for stuttering on a single syllable word. “I’ll be

There.”

“Cool! Great! Awesome!” Felix said, bouncing on his toes a little as he gripped his jingling backpack in tight fists. He took a few steps back, edging towards the door. “Speaking of cheer, I better get to practice.”

“I’ll see you Saturday,” Hyunjin said, fighting the smile on his lips because god *damn* how was he so adorable?

The blond nodded and flashed him a bright smile and said, “It’s a date!” before running off, blond hair flowing behind him.

Hyunjin stood rooted in his spot. The words were not computing but one thing was very, very certain; he was actively dying in this moment

and completely incapable of saving himself. He'd heard the angels calling him and that angel was a kitten hybrid named Felix who had just thrown him a smile and called Saturday a *date*.

Which surely, it wasn't but the word refused to die out. It echoed around and around and around in his head. It followed him as he rode home, bouncing off the inside of his helmet and plaguing him over the rumble of his bike. It followed him upstairs to his room and played like a backing track to his dinner.

And when his parents asked how his day had been, he told them once again, it had been fine. When in reality, it had been confusing and wonderful and entirely overwhelming.

"Can I borrow the car on Saturday?" He asked suddenly. He figured it might be less awkward to show up to a car wash if he actually had a car.

Surprised by the request, his mom and dad glanced at each other before his dad turned to him and nodded. "Sure. Do you have plans?"

He could see his mom fighting not to hyperventilate out of the corner of his eye so he kept his gaze on his much calmer father and nodded shallowly. "Yeah. I uh…there's a fundraiser- a car wash- at school. I t-thought it might be nice to show some support or something." He finished with a shrug, fork dragging through his peas and rolling them around his plate.

His dad's eyes blew wide and he knew *exactly* what he was thinking: Show support? For *school?*

"Show some support?" His mom asked, her voice fucking vibrating with all her unasked questions boiling under the surface.

Hyunjin nodded. "Or something."

"Or *something*?" His mom repeated. A devilish little smile was growing across her lips. "What's the *'something'*?"

"Nothing." But he said it too fast and he watched his mom's eyes narrow, the thrill of the hunt hitting her hard.

"Okay then *who's* the '*something*'?"

Fucking bingo.

“*No one*.” He said, eyes nailed to his plate and desperately hoping she somehow missed the blush on his cheeks.

He could *feel* her smirk across the table and chose to ignore it to the best of his ability.

“Is it one of those nice boys you sat with at lunch?”

Hyunjin sighed, figuring that the only way out of this was by giving them a piece of the truth. “Yeah,” He said quietly. “But can we not make such a big deal about it?”

He was already hearing the phantom voice of Felix saying the word date in the back of his mind. Any more and he was sure he’d have a genuine mental breakdown over it.

“Alright, alright,” His mom said, face alight with curiosity and delight. “Maybe you can borrow the car sometime and drive your new friends over here for dinner?”

“Sure, I’ll get *right* on that,” Hyunjin said, sarcasm heavy in his voice.

*****

Dear Diary,

Holy fuck, Felix invited me to the school carwash fundraiser thing and he called it a date. I said I would go and that I’d see him on Saturday and he said, and I fucking quote, “It’s a date!”

DATE.

And like, I KNOW it’s not because wouldn’t it be kind of weird to have a date where he’s essentially working? And also where there are a ton of other people? So like, I know he just said it to be cute because he literally can’t help but be cute always but holy shit.

Should I wear a tie? Do I even OWN a tie? I guess I could borrow one of my dad’s but that would raise a lot of questions so I’d have to steal it. And I’d really rather not steal from my dad even if it’s just temporary and it’s really more like borrowing but still.

But wearing a tie to hang out in a school parking lot is probably too much. Plus, it's NOT a date. I know that. I just…wow.

A date.

With Felix.

I wonder if it would make him happy enough to purr. If he'd let me see that side of him…

But I'm getting ahead of myself. It's just a Saturday and a school function, nothing more.

But it will still be nice to see him.

And maybe one day? It will be a date. A real one, with flowers and dinner and hand holding. And if that ever happens? I'm going to hold on and never, ever let him go.

Chapter End Notes

Oooo, we have a fundraiser coming up! I'll see you on Thursday

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Hello and happy Thursday beautiful readers!!! ❤ I hope this week has been treating you well so far ❤ I want to give a big, huge, teary-eyed thank you for all of the love you've been pouring on me and this story so far ❤ Honestly, stepping back into this space and posting again has been more healing than I could have ever imagined and I'm so incredibly grateful and amazed at how loving, funny and insightful you all are. I'm so lucky to you have readers and friends like you ❤ OKAY, enough sappy stuff from me, let's go see Hyunjin loose his little mind over Kitten Lixie!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Minho had shark eyes. Not that Hyunjin would ever say that to his face; he didn't have a *death* wish. But sitting there across the library table, clean cut and wearing a basic white t-shirt and jeans, he looked a thousand times more threatening than Hyunjin did with his leather jacket and ripped denim.

But where as Hyunjin looked perhaps like the stereotypical bad boy cast in an afterschool special, Minho had a brand of '*I don't give a fuck*' that simply radiated off of him with every breath he took. Hyunjin's aura was in his clothes and accessories; Minho's was in his very skin.

He sat across the table from Hyunjin, eyes dark and blinkless as he waited for Hyunjin to tackle the next problem.

"I uh…I…" He trailed off, finally ripping his eyes off the predator across the table from him and back to the string of letters and numbers he was supposed to solve for. "How do I…s-start?" He flinched at his stutter, dearly hoping those weren't his last words.

He heard a little sigh from across the table and watched as his paper slid out from under his nose. He glanced up and found Minho examining it carefully. "You don't have to be so nervous." He said, setting the paper down and beginning to scribble underneath the problem at light speed.

"Sorry," He muttered, feeling bad that Minho was stuck here on a Friday after school, tutoring him.

Minho huffed out something like a laugh and kept working. "You

don't need to apologize either."

Hyunjin nearly said sorry again but nearly bit his lip off instead in an attempt to follow instructions. "Still. I appreciate you helping me."

The brunette across the table shrugged and finally looked up, the pencil basically smoking with how fast he'd solved the problem. "It's no worries. Plus, Jiji has Spanish club and I told him I'd drive him home so I had time to kill."

"Jiji?"

"Jisung." Minho said, his eyes falling back down to the table to watch his thumb attack the other. It was subtle and casual, like so much Minho did but Hyunjin swore on his life that he saw the edges of his shark eyes soften. He saw a little smile tug on the corner of his lips at the mention of the other boy and oh, if there was *one thing* Hyunjin knew, it was what love looked like.

He had watched every romance movie that Netflix, Hulu *and* HBO Max had to offer. He has analyzed the Notebook like he was prepping to write a dissertation on it. He had watched Love, Actually ever since December because it was a fucking *Christmas movie* and anyone who said otherwise was a *monster*

He'd read every love poem he could get his hands on, a collection of them swimming in his backpack right now (Pablo Neruda).

And recently, he's even fallen in love himself.

So yeah, he fancied himself a little bit of an expert when it came to clocking hopeless pining. After all, like recognized like.

A part of him wanted to lean forward, chin in hands and ask in a dreamy voice if Minho had a crush on Jisung. But he also didn't want to be eviscerated by Minho's terrifying slow blink.

So instead he cleared his throat and asked, "So how long have you known Jisung?" Even though he already had an idea because Minho had mentioned it on the first day when the two of them had arrived at the table.

Minho's eyes narrowed ever so slightly but he answered, "Since kindergarten. He's my next door neighbor."

So cliche but oh my god, he was actually the boy next door? So

fucking cute. Had Minho ever tossed rocks at his window? Had they ever snuck out together? Had they-

“Why?” Minho's tone was skeptical, his eyes narrowed like he wanted to read whatever was going on in Hyunjin's mind. He slid the paper back across the table like a threat.

“N-no reason.” Hyunjin said, his mind screeching to a halt and his heart skipping several beats. “You two just seem close, that's all.”

That wasn't all. They seemed close *and then some.*

Minho's gaze stayed training on Hyunjin with a healthy dose of wariness.

“Next question,” he said finally, blunt fingernail tapping the problem on the page.

Hyunjin's stomach rolled but he slouched his long back over a little and carefully tried to follow the example Minho had set for him above.

But his mind was filled with questions and daydreams and fuzzy little hopes and it made all the numbers look bland and aggressive and ugly.

“He seems very nice.” He said suddenly, glancing up. He wanted to hear Minho gush about him. Just a little. Or a lot. Whatever he could get.

“He is.” Minho said, eyes getting a little lethal.

“And funny. Very funny too.”

Minho huffed air out through his nostrils and leaned forward suddenly, elbows on the edge of the table. “Do you have a crush on Jisung?”

Hyunjin froze, the very question feeling like infidelity. He was in love with *Felix* and only ever Felix!

“N-no! No, not at all!”

Minho leaned back, looking almost a hint relieved. “Good.” The casualness in his voice sounded forced so Hyunjin decided to risk it all.

“Why? Is he…seeing someone?”

“No.” Minho said, eyes boring into Hyunjin as he added, “But he's off limits.”

“Why?” Hyunjin asked, his voice coming out in a borderline whisper.

“Because. He just is.” Minho said, his finger tapping the problem again with a staccato assertion. “Now stop blabbing and get back to work.”

Hyunjin ducked his head, deciding to focus back in on his work even as his heart thrummed in his chest.

He wondered if Jisung knew that Minho liked him. He wondered if Minho had ever asked him out or even hinted at the fact that he’d developed feelings over the years. Or perhaps it had been love at first sight? What if Minho had loved Jisung ever since they were little?

Hyunjin sighed wistfully, romantic visions dancing in his head helplessly. God, he loved love.

“What’s with the dreamy face? Pay attention.” Minho said, voice steady with authority that snapped Hyunjin’s mind back to the page.

He nodded, determined to actually reap some kind of benefit from this tutoring session. After all, he didn’t want Minho to think he was ungrateful or a slacker. After all, most people assumed by the way he looked that he slouched deep in the back of class, failing every test and not giving a shit about it. But that couldn't have been further from the truth and this was Hyunjin’s opportunity to prove it.

He hunched his spine with renewed vigor and studiously tried to copy Minho’s process from above. He asked quiet questions when he got stumped but Minho, for all his short answers and monotone voice, was very patient.

By the end of the worksheet, Hyunjin had successfully worked through 3 more of those problems, getting a little faster each time.

“Good job,” Minho said as he checked his work, a very faint smile on his lips.

“Thank you,” Hyunjin said quietly, fitting the paper back in his calculus folder and sliding it into his backpack. “And thanks again for your help.”

“Like I said, it’s really no problem at all,” Minho’s lips were pulled taut, looking a little uncomfortable as he rose to his feet.

But Hyunjin was saved from an awkward goodbye as Jisung crashed through the library doors, out of breath and eyes on *fire*.

“Yah, Jiji, what’s with the dramatic entrance?” Minho crowed, voice hushed and his narrowed eyes flicking apologetically over to the cross librarian behind the counter.

“Minnie! Minnie, I saw a dog! Out the window of the Spanish room!” He grabbed Minho’s hand and started tugging, “Come on! Let’s go see if we can catch it!”

But Minho dug his heels in and gave Jisung a very flat look. “A dog? No thanks, I’ll pass.”

In an instant, Jisung was whipping around, the biggest pout on the planet pushing out his lower lip. He clawed his hands up Minho’s arm, clinging to it helplessly. “But Minnie,” He whined.

“No. *No.*”

“But, but I helped you catch that stray cat over summer break,” Jisung said, eyes wide and round and so effective that even Hyunjin wanted to offer to help.

“It was not a *cat,* Jiji, it was a *possum* and I specifically asked you not to chase it!”

“Details,” Jisung scoffed, letting go of Minho’s arm and rocking back on his heels.

“Yes! Very important, crucial details!”

But Jisung’s attention had finally skated over to Hyunjin, for the first time noticing his presence.

“Oh, hi Hyunjin!” He chirped, smile bright like he truly was just delighted to see him. Which was odd because they’d hardly said two words to each other.

“Hello,” He said quietly, shoulders hitching up a little closer to his ears as he gripped the strap of his backpack a little tighter. His other arm was clamped down over his helmet, pressing it a little too hard against his ribs.

“Were you two like, hanging out?” Jisung asked his eyes darting from Hyunjin to Minho and back again and *oh.* It was like that, was it?

Hyunjin felt his heart thump solidly in his chest, that bubble of hope growing larger and larger. Because Jisung may have been a silly guy who was easy going and always down for a good laugh but the way he was looking at Minho right now? He’d bet his motorcycle that Jisung felt at least a little bit of whatever Minho felt for him.

What were these two doing? How were they not an item? It seemed so obvious that they liked each other and Hyunjin had only known them for a few days.

He suddenly desperately wished he had Felix’s number. He wanted to ask him if he’d notice this energy between them, seen it building over the years. He wanted to know if there had been any flimsy valentines day cards in elementary school or any school dances they’d gone to as “*friends”*. He wanted the gossip.

But he didn’t have Felix’s number and the very thought of asking for it made him feel like he’d spontaneously combust so he figured it was safe to say he was *not* ready to take that step.

“Studying.” Minho answered, swinging his backpack over his shoulder and beginning to walk out of the library. “Lixie asked me to tutor him. So I did.”

“Aw, Minnie, that’s so sweet of you.” Jisung cooed, stumbled alongside him and beaming at him.

Hyunjin followed brainlessly, not sure what else to do and a little addicted to watching them interact. He watched as a blush ripened Minho’s cheeks at Jisung’s gentle praise. He watched the way he swayed to the side, knocking his shoulder playfully against his friend’s.

“No I’m not,” He muttered, sounding almost embarrassed.

But Jisung just snorted, looking over his shoulder to tell Hyunjin, “Minnie is super sweet, he just doesn’t want anyone to know.” He beamed at the side of Minho’s face before flipping around, walking backwards next to Minho so he could speak to Hyunjin.

“Once, when we were in middle school, he stayed up all night with me to help me study for a big science test. And he wasn’t even taking that class! But he spent all night reading the book with me and

making sure I memorized all the keywords and stuff."

"Yeah well I can't have my best friend getting held back because he fails his finals. How embarrassing." Minho muttered, shooting a slanted half smile over his shoulder at the other two.

Jisung rolled his eyes, knocking their shoulders together as he turned back around. They pushed open the front doors of the school, Hyunjin following into the breezy afternoon sunlight.

The trees were still mostly green, a few rogue leaves deciding to hop ship early and turning a pale yellow. But besides that telltale little chill to the air, more of a hint than a declaration, it still felt like summer most days.

Hyunjin took a few steps to the side, sort of wanting to just disappear but figuring leaving without saying goodbye would just make him look rude.

"Uh, thanks again Minho." He said, cringing because he knew he'd said it too many times already. "You two have a good night."

He turned to leave, only a few short strides from his bike when he heard Jisung behind him call out.

"Wait! Hyunnie, can I ride with you?"

He and Minho had twin reactions; both wiping around in surprise at the bright eyed brunette.

"*What?*" Minho hissed, brows nearly up to his hairline.

"I uh, can you…you want to ride? W-with me?" Hyunjin's eyes had never gone so wide before.

He'd never had a passenger on his bike before. He knew *how,* it had been a part of getting his motorcycle license after all, but outside of that one test, it had always just been him riding solo.

"Yeah! It would be so cool!" Jisung was literally bouncing on his toes, excitedly peaking behind Hyunjin at the gleaming black bike behind him.

"I thought I was giving you a ride home?" Minho said, eyes looking vaguely panicked in a way that nearly broke Hyunjin's heart. He could see the way his stoic mask was cracking. His eyes were darting from

his friend to the bike, desperately trying to find a way to keep his crush from zooming off with some new kid.

Minho may not have known this but Hyunjin was already committed to their cause. So he took a deep breath and painted his lips with a soft smile. “Sorry but I only have one helmet. And it wouldn’t be safe to have you ride without one.” He added the second part because so far, every little nugget of information he learned of this man made him doubt his self-preservation skills so he figured he better just outright state it for him. “You should let Minho drive you home.”

He saw the way Minho’s shoulder visibly relaxed. He smiled at Hyunjin softly, every ounce of stone in his face becoming something softer and grateful. Like he appreciated Hyunjin declining Jisung. Like he’d imagined the vision of his crush riding off with some other guy and was intensely relieved to not have to watch it happen in real life.

Jisung glanced at Minho and the edges of his lips lifted ever so slightly. “Yeah, okay,” He agreed easily before pointing at Hyunjin with what he probably thought was a stern look. “But you should get a second helmet! I’m sure Lix will want a ride eventually.”

Hyunjin’s face was on fire in an instant. “H-he, wait, what?”

Jisung broke into a fit of giggles while Minho rolled his eyes and yanked on his shoulder, getting him to turn away. “Jiji, shut up, leave the poor guy alone.”

“B-but-” What did they know? Had Felix said something?

“See you later, new kid!” Minho called out over his shoulder before pausing and adding. “And if you ever need help with your calc again, just let me know.”

Hyunjin swallowed thickly, his heart beating in his fingertips. “Uh yeah, t-that would be great.”

Minho nodded, that same little softness to his eyes. “Cool then, how about same time next week?”

Was this friendship? Was this how it started? Or was Hyunjin just so unprepared and inexperienced that he was getting confused?

“S-sure. I mean, thanks!”

Minho snorted, nodded and then finally began walking across the lot towards his car, Jisung chatting away into his ear.

Hyunjin watched them walk away, getting smaller and smaller as they made their way to Minho's little car. He watched as Minho opened Jisung's door for him, like a proper gentleman and he watched as Jisung continued to talk and talk and talk like they hadn't just seen each other at lunch earlier that day.

He felt a hesitant little smile crop up on his lips and for once, he didn't try to quell it. He let it bloom, precious and fragile as he imagined, for just a second, that this was the beginning of something good.

This time, it will be different.

*****

Saturday dawned like a true autumn day; chilly and windy. It wasn't exactly the weather you'd want for a carwash but it wasn't bad enough to shut the whole thing down. At least, he assumed it wouldn't be.

So Hyunjin woke at six in the morning, his energy boundless and ricocheting off the walls in his mind. He couldn't stop *thinking.*

Would Felix be washing cars or manning the bake sale? And how busy was this thing going to be? Were they expecting a large turn out? It was a fundraiser for the cheer team so he hoped they got plenty of business. But if they were packed with students, would he even be able to *talk* to Felix or would he be too busy?

What if he'd just been invited out of pity or because Felix knew he could count on his newest simp to shell out a little cash?

What if Felix was washing cars and *wearing a swimsuit?*

At that thought, Hyunjin had groaned and thrown his covers off, instantly letting the biting chill of his bedroom wake him up and stop his thoughts from going down very inappropriate avenues.

He jammed his running shoes on, determined to work off a little bit of this nervous energy. Plus, the fundraiser didn't start for a few more

hours so he had time to kill.

He warmed up a little before setting out at an easy, conversational pace. Not that he had anyone to talk to but that was fine. He had *plenty* to think about.

He'd finished his first week at his new school and so far, things really did seem like they'd be different. And not different like how two schools ago he'd had his locker searched after an anonymous tip he'd brought a *gun.* But like, different in a good way.

Different as in, he had a place to sit at lunch with people who didn't simultaneously slide to the other end of the table. Different as in, he spent his study hall chatting with someone instead of doing his homework. Different as in, he had weekly plans now to get tutored by a guy who told him it was no problem and smiled at him like he meant it.

It was overwhelming but it was good, Hyunjin had to admit. He could feel that little part in the back of his brain waiting for the *but.* Waiting for that other shoe to drop. But he'd really like to know what it would feel like to *not* feel that way. He wanted to know what it would feel like to sink into this tentative, newborn idea of belonging somewhere. What it would feel like if this was *normal* and not different.

He wove his way through neighborhoods, the traffic almost nonexistent this early on a Saturday. It was peaceful. The stillness of a cold morning making everything seem a little more simple and a little less loud.

He wrapped up after a few miles, effectively making a big circle and ending up back at his house. He let himself in, hearing the tell tale signs of his mom shuffling around the kitchen.

He dragged his sweaty self toward the smell of coffee, determined to chug a glass of water and get his caffeine started for the day.

"Morning," He said, voice still a little faint as he worked to catch his breath.

His mom smiled at him and moved to pour him a cup of coffee without him even needing to ask. He smiled at it, his lips curving around the lip of his water glass as he tipped his head back, draining it and going for a second.

"Good run?" His mom asked.

He hummed, taking another sip before accepting the steaming mug of coffee. It could be a sweltering July day in *hell* and he'd still drink a hot cup of coffee as long as it wasn't decaf. That shit was useless and you couldn't convince him otherwise. Anyone who said they *liked* the taste of coffee was either lying or insane and Hyunjin would know because he could probably classify as insane and he did indeed like the bitter slap of bean juice in the morning. But if he was being honest, it was more about the fringe benefits of being able to function on four hours of sleep because he'd stayed up too late reading again.

"A bit cold," He commented, his mind zeroing in on the warm mug in hand. He hovered low, letting the steam cleanse his thoughts of little blonds with bright smiles and all the implications a Saturday could have. "Perfect for a run though."

She nodded, cradling her mug in return and propping her hip against the counter. She wore her faded pink robe that she'd had for all of time. It made Hyunjin feel like a kid again just seeing it. "Probably not great for a carwash though," she said, her eyes still a little tired but her smile soft and open.

Hyunjin felt his stomach churn a little, the very idea of that making something like butterflies erupt in his stomach. "Yeah, I uh, I thought the same thing. But there's a bake sale too so that's good."

She hummed, taking a sip of her own coffee before looking Hyunjin dead in the eyes and asking, "Are you nervous?"

He really, *really* wanted to say no. But he knew he was a bad liar, always had been. "Yeah. A little." He admitted, ducking his head to watch how his exhales caused little ripples in his coffee.

"Well, don't be." She said, voice soft yet urgent. "You're a great kid. And no matter what, I'm proud of you for putting yourself out there. I know it's hard for you."

Was he really putting himself out there or was Felix just dragging him in? Had he chosen to fall in love? No. But was he resisting it? Also no. So perhaps he hadn't really initiated much but maybe his lack of resistance could be seen as his own lackluster way of attempting to form connections. As far as he was concerned, if Felix asked, he'd say yes. And that was as close to 'putting himself out there' as he could muster right now.

"Yeah, I uh…I'm trying." He said, biting his bottom lip.

His mom reached out, ruffling his hair before groaning. “Ew, your hair is all sweaty! Go shower!”

He laughed, taking a scalding gulp of his coffee and setting it down on the counter to scamper upstairs.

He washed thoroughly, making sure to even deliberately scrub behind his ears as if Felix would be *checking* or something. Then again, he’d never gone to a school fundraiser so he really didn’t have any idea how this would go.

He washed his face twice, just in case and even spritz a little cologne in the end. He threw on a pair of his favorite ripped jeans, pulling out his worn converse since he didn’t need the boots for riding today. They were faded and dusty and that perfect level of old that made them look so well loved. He tossed on a long sleeved shirt and layered a deep green sweater over top. It wasn’t anything terribly inspired but he was comfortable and felt like himself, which was what clothing had always been to him; a way to express himself.

He jogged back down the stairs, determined to fit in a little more coffee and maybe some breakfast before heading to the school.

He found his mug already refilled and steaming again, smiling over at his mom who was sitting at the table, leafing through the newspaper while his dad, sleep rumpled and wearing his thick rimmed glasses, sipped his coffee and read the back to whatever page she was on.

“Morning Hyunnie,” His dad said, reaching over to pat his shoulder and give him a tired smile.

“No work today?” Hyunjin asked. His dad usually had weekends off but sometimes he would log on to work through emails or do a bit of prep before a big meeting.

“Nope, not today. Your mom wants to go check out the farmers market today.” He yawned like he would much rather be sleeping but knew it was in his best interest to accompany his wife in her quest for local apple butter.

“Ooo, you’ll have to let me know how it is!” Hyunjin chirped. He *loved* a good farmer’s market. Hell, he loved a *bad* one; he was just a slut for artisanal goods and supporting small business.

“Sure you don’t want to go?” His mom asked, a glint to her eyes that he instantly recognized as a test. Because she *knew* how much he liked

a farmer's market. She wanted to see if he'd cave; she wanted to see how much these mysterious friends meant to him.

Oh, if only she knew.

"Not this time," He said with a certainty he usually lacked. He had told Felix he'd be there and that was that.

"Hmm," His mom said with a sly little grin blooming in place.

"But maybe next time," He added, because he really would like to check it out sometime.

Her smile lost its little edge and she nodded, eyes softening. "Definitley."

Hyunjin sipped his coffee in silence after that, scrolling Pinterest on his phone, searching

through his painting inspo pics to see if something struck a chord in him. He thought it might be nice to paint later; it had been a while and he was starting to get the itch again.

But once his coffee was draining, he decided to table the idea and resume his search later. It was time to head out, lest he stew in his nerves for one more minute and do something stupid like explode out of anxiety or decide to ask his dad for that damn tie.

"Well, I guess I'm going to head out." He said, a little wobble to his voice as he stood to rinse out his coffee cup.

"Don't forget your coat!" His mom called out.

He nodded, heading toward the front door where his leather jacket hung on the coat rack.

"Hyunnie?"

He stopped, turning to see his dad holding the car keys out toward him with an amused smile in place.

Hyunjin chuckled nervously and rubbed the back of his neck. "I uh, guess I'll need those, won't I?" He strode over, plucking them from his dad's fingers and turned to leave with his tail between his legs.

"And Hyune?"

He stopped, turning back around slowly. What else could he have forgotten? *Pants*? Oh god, had he forgotten pants?

But his dad was fishing his wallet out of his pocket and plucking a few bills from within, holding them out. “Why don’t you stop and get some coffee or hot chocolate for your friends? It’s chilly and it sounds like you’ll all be outside.”

Hyunjin hovered in the middle of the room, halfway between his dad’s sweet smile and the doorway. “I…are you sure?” He asked, slowly accepting the cash with a furrowed brow.

But his dad and mom were both smiling at him and nodding.

“Of course,” His dad said, fitting his wallet back in his pocket. “Take advantage of having cup holders for once.” He said with a chuckle.

Hyunjin felt the side of his mouth twist up into a smile, a fizzy feeling in his chest that felt dangerously like excitement starting to simmer deep under his ribs. “Thanks,” He said, cramming the money into his pocket and turning to leave again with a little more pep in his step.

Thanks to his runs through town over the summer, he knew of a coffee shop that wasn’t too far off out of the way from school. He stopped in, securing another coffee for himself because he was a hopeless addict and a hot chocolate for Felix. He didn’t know what he liked but while he’d met those who didn’t like coffee, he’d *never* met someone who didn’t like hot chocolate. It seemed like a safer bet.

He set them in the cup holder in the car, the simple luxury making him smile as he slowly pulled out of the lot and back onto the road.

He cruised responsibly towards school, making sure to take good care of the car his parents had entrusted him with. Not that he didn’t always drive responsibly but he just felt the pressure a little more when it was anything other than his motorcycle.

He took the last left turn towards the school and could already see the line of cars queued up in the parking lot. It looked like despite the chill, the turnout hadn’t been hindered in the slightest.

Hyunjin joined the end of the line, letting the engine idle as he waited for instruction. His eyes hopelessly started roving over the lot, packed with students and faculty alike, in search of a little blond kitten. But amidst the balloon towers and the hand painted banner blowing in the chilly breeze and the shifting crowd of students milling about, he

couldn't pinpoint a five foot nothing man.

He drummed his fingers on the wheel, peeling his eyes away from the action, starting to feel that overwhelm grip his heart again. What was he even *doing* here? At most, he'd get to see Felix for a whole four seconds, a flash through the crowd or something. But it didn't mean they'd get to hang out or even talk.

He sighed. If nothing else, at least his parents would get a clean car back.

Hyunjin nearly jumped out of his skin when a sharp knock sounded against the glass of

the driver side door. His neck nearly snapped in two as he swung to the window and found Changbin *beaming* at him through the glass, waving excitedly. Wearing a cheer uniform.

Hyunjin hurriedly rolled the window down and couldn't help but blurt out, "You're a cheerleader?"

Changbin laughed, that infectious giggle lighting up a place inside Hyunjin and dialing his anxiety down a notch. "*Technically,* it's called a yell leader but hell yeah I am! You think I'd let just *anyone* throw our sunshine up in the air like that?"

The taller man couldn't help the way his ears perked up at the mention of Felix and he had to wonder if Changbin noticed because his smile became a little fuller, a little warmer as his head tilted to the side. "Speaking of, Lix is manning the bakesale table. You should go say hi."

Hyunjin nodded, his mouth suddenly dry as his eyes skated back over the milling students to find a table at the fringes of it. Sure enough, there sat a bored looking blond, chin in his palm and tail wrapped tightly around him like he was cold.

"Here, give me your keys. I'll come find you when it's ready." Changbin said, even going so far as to open the driver's side door like a true gentleman. Hyunjin stood, feeling like a giant next to the shorter man. He mumbled a thank you and placed the keys in the other boy's hand before he ducked back in to grab the drinks. He'd be so sick with regret if he forgot to give Lix something warm to drink, especially after seeing him shivering over there by himself.

With a jovial slap to his back, he nodded at Changbin, trying his best

to offer a little smile that received another one of his beaming smiles that used his whole entire face. Hyunjin wished he could be a little bit more like him. He'd *also* been the new kid. But he'd been smiley and approachable and friendly and had carved a place for himself in this school within the last year. Here he stood a part of the cheer team, surrounded by friends and laughing as someone got sprayed with water.

But Hyunjin was none of those things. He was quiet and introspective, prone to pondering late into the night. He hid behind layers of leather and metal, hoping no one would look hard enough to see the squishy, bleeding heart underneath. But as he drew nearer to the bake sale table, watching Felix scroll lackadaisically on his phone, he realized that he didn't want Felix to see what everyone else saw. He didn't *want* him to think he was some big bad wolf. He just wanted to be himself.

And he was pretty sure he'd never felt that way before.

He had a hello on the tip of his tongue when the blond's ears twitched before his head shot up, a hopeful look on his face that bloomed into something magnificent and elated.

"Hyune! You came!" He stood up, looking ready to vault over the table and tackle him with joy. And Hyunjin would have been *more* than happy to sustain the second degree burns that would cause but instead he smiled back and offered the steaming cup of hot cocoa to him with a shaking hand.

"For you." he said simply, watching as the blond's head tilted to the side with curiosity as he accepted the drink.

He had the prettiest, pinkest blush as he said, "For me? Really?"

Hyunjin nodded, pretty sure his cheeks were the same hue as Felix's. "Y-yeah. It's chilly and, I dunno, I thought this might help?" It came out as a question even though he was simply stating facts.

The blond bit his lip and took a sip before his eyes fucking *exploded* into sparkles. "Oh my *god!* It's *hot chocolate!"* He took another, longer pull. He licked his lips in a *very* distracting way and explained. "I was worried it was coffee!"

"Don't like coffee?" Hyunjin asked, gripping his own cup with both hands just so they didn't hang awkwardly by his sides.

The blond *fervently* shook his head. “Nope. Never have, never will.” His blush returned as he ducked his head, “But if you’d brought it for me, I’d have drank it.”

Hyunjin felt the tips of his fingers tingle, an odd levity starting to bubble in his chest. “If you don’t like something, I don’t want you to pretend to just to spare my feelings.” He said. “You can always be honest with me.” He added, wondering if it was saying too much. Wondering if he was saying what he wanted to believe for himself.

“Okay, Hyune,” Felix said, slow blinking at him and finally sitting back down on his uncomfortable looking stool. “But only if you’re honest with me too then, okay?”

“Okay,” He said instantly, not even pausing to wonder if he’d regret that some day.

The blond nodded. “Good.”

His neck stretched long as he scanned the line of cars behind Hyunjin. “So which one is yours?”

“Black sedan,” He said, pointing toward his parents card.

Felix hummed. “Looks like it might be a while before they get to it,” He noted, several

cars in front of Hyunjin’s. “Guess you’ll just have to keep me company until then.” He even went so far as to shoot Hyunjin a wink that very nearly stopped his heart.

He hung on thanks to a sheer unwillingness to die before getting to spend even a single Saturday with the love of his life. He moved to the side of the table, making it clear that he wasn’t waiting in line and propped his hip against it, trying to pay attention to the warmth on his hand.

Even with the chilly temperatures, the car wash seemed to be where all the action was. People were standing around, chatting and joking with friends while Felix’s fellow cheerleaders ran around in their uniforms, shrieking as they tried to douse one another with freezing cold water. To Hyunjin, it sounded like an easy way to get hypothermia but he supposed people had different ideas of fun.

“So how come you’re working the bake sale instead of the car wash?” Hyunjin asked, wondering if the blond felt left out. If he did, maybe

he could offer to watch the stand so Felix could go hang with the others.

But he watched as Felix's nose scrunched up adorably, a look of detestation on his face. "Because, working the carwash is the *worst.*"

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I did it freshman year but never again."

"Why's that?" Hyunjin asked, low key terrified as to why Felix would be so adverse to it. Had something happened?

But instead of the dark shadow Hyunjin had imagined slipping over Felix's face, he watched that pretty blush return instead.

"What?" He asked again, voice soft and curious.

"It's just…it's stupid." Felix said, his fingers playing with the edge of the lid.

"I'm sure it's not." Hyunjin assured him.

And Felix looked up with wide eyes that looked like he trusted him. "I just…I don't like getting wet." He shivered, like just saying the words brought back uncomfortable memories.

Hyunjin watched as Felix's tail tightened around his waist, as if trying to hold him securely and assure him everything was okay. And it was that, his tail and the way his ears flattened ever so slightly, that made it all click for Hyunjin.

"Of course you don't." He said aloud. Because cats didn't like water. And sure, Felix wasn't a cat but that didn't mean he didn't have *some* cat-like tendencies, right?

The blond flicked worried brown eyes up to glance at Hyunjin like he was waiting for the *but* or the teasing to begin. "I know it's weird-"

"It's not weird." Hyunjin immediately assured him, wishing he had the confidence to reach out and still his worried little hands on the coffee cup. "It's just part of who you are." He shrugged because to him, it really was that simple. It wasn't about him being a cat and it wasn't about him being a human. It was about him being *Felix.*

The blond's eyes studied him for a few long seconds, carefully poking and prodding him like it wanted to know what the limit was. Like it

wanted to test and see if Hyunjin could understand and accept just a little bit more.

“I just…I’ve always hated getting wet. I never went to pool parties growing up or played in the snow. And…I mean, it’s even a struggle to shower. Like, I *do,* I bathe, I promise! But it’s just…it’s not fun.”

Hyunjin watched in amazement as Felix’s blush turned into something deep and less delicate. It turned into that kind of shade that meant something beyond simple, light embarrassment. It verged on shame. Hyunjin would know, he’d felt it many times in his life.

When he’d felt particularly exposed, his bullies circled around him on the playground and called him a cry baby. Those cruel kids pointing out the parts of him that were honest and vulnerable and making him feel like he’d done something wrong when really, it was just who he was.

When he’d been made to feel like he didn’t belong simply because of who he’d always been. It made you want to hide. It made you want to fold in on yourself over and over and over again until you disappeared into nothing.

Did bold, confident Felix ever feel like that?

Because if so, that simply wouldn’t do.

Hyunjin took a deep breath and reached across the small expanse between them, resting a single finger on top of Felix’s anxious one and stilling it.

The blond looked up, eyes wide and struggling.

So Hyunjin smiled at him, trying to make his face as soft as he could. He knew it didn’t lend well to melting looks like this, not with the sharp cheekbones and narrow eyes. But he tried and he kept his voice soft when he said, “Thank you for clarifying that you bathe.”

The blond’s eyes blew up to nearly twice their size, spilling outside the lines and looking damn near comical before a sputtering laugh rocked out of him, a surprised smile flooding his lips.

The blond giggled again, the blush on his cheeks becoming lighter and more playful as his trapped finger escaped out from under Hyunjin’s only to land on top. “I couldn’t have you thinking I didn’t.”

Hyunjin smiled back, feeling a freedom cropping up inside as his finger fought for dominance, taking the top spot again. “How embarrassing,” He joked.

“Utterly mortifying,” Felix said back, his smile wide and mildly devious as his little finger landed on top again.

But their little finger stacking battle was interrupted by the sound of a shriek across the parking lot that had both of them whipping their head toward the sight of Jisung *racing* across the asphalt, Minho hot on his heels with a bucket of water. Chan was chasing after them, giggling too hard to keep up as Jisung begged the crowd of onlookers to help him.

“And there he goes,” Felix sighed, sounding both wistful and tired.

Hyunjin turned back to the blond, eyebrow quirked in question and he nearly rolled his eyes with mirth.

“Jisung has made it his mission since freshman year to crash every fundraiser we put on.

“Why?” Hyunjin asked, feeling he already sort of knew the answer.

Sure enough, Felix shrugged and said, “Because it’s Jisung?”

Fair enough.

“Well what about Minho?” Hyunjin asked, still a little shocked to have seen his stoic tutor chasing down his crush in the school parking lot in front of everyone.

Felix giggled and rolled his eyes again. “Minho goes wherever Jisung goes.”

And with that phrasing alone, Hyunjin just *knew* he wasn’t the only one who saw it. He leaned forward a little, feeling borderline conspiratorial. “They sure seem close,” He hedged carefully, not sure how to really broach the subject he’d been *dying* to gossip about.

Felix leaned in, in return, elbows on the table and lips smirking. “If by *‘close’* you mean helplessly in love then yes, I agree.”

“I *knew it!*” Hyunjin crowed, careful to keep his exhilaration to a controlled hiss. “I fucking *knew it!*”

“Oh my god, so you notice it too, right? Like, I’m not crazy?”

Hyunjin was shaking his head before Felix could finish. “Not at all! Minho is head over heels in *love* with Jisung. Oh, I’m sorry I mean-”

“Jiji!” They both crowed before breaking into a fit of giggles.

Felix leaned forward even further, standing so he’d be at least a little bit closer to Hyunjin’s eye level, even if he was still a few inches shy. His tail was wiping about excitedly, mirroring the fire in his eyes. “Channie says I’m looking into it too much and Seungminnie says true love is for losers.”

Hyunjin couldn’t help the way he gasped at that, hand flying to his heart like he’d be able to feel it breaking underneath.

But Felix reached out, laying a soft hand on his shoulder in an attempt to console his obvious distress. “Don’t worry, he doesn’t really mean it. That’s just how Seungminnie talks.”

Sacrilidge. Complete and utter sacrilege. That’s what Hyunjin thought. But he didn’t *say it* out loud because he figured that would be considered rude.

“Love isn’t for losers,” Hyunjin muttered.

He felt the hand on his shoulder squeeze a little before dusting it off needlessly. He looked up through his lashes to find Felix biting his bottom lip with something like fondness in his eyes. “I didn’t realize you were such a romantic.”

Hyunjin’s heart leapt into his throat because if only Felix knew just how *much* he thought about love. If only he knew that nowadays, love and Felix tended to occupy his brain at the same time, slowly becoming inextricable from one another. Love was Felix. Felix was love.

Instead, he shrugged, too afraid to admit anything out loud.

“Are you single?” Felix asked suddenly, out of the blue.

And even though the world was screeching to a halt around him, his ears thumping with his own heartbeat, he didn’t hesitate to answer.

“Very much so, yes.” He said, aware he sounded pitiful and not caring because why did Felix want to know?

“Hmm,” the kitten mused, head tilting to the side as he studied

Hyunjin like he couldn't figure it out. "How odd."

It really wasn't. He hardly talked to people other than his parents. He didn't join clubs, he didn't put himself out there and until today, he didn't attend school functions. With his conversation skills rivaling that of a wall and his near inability to string together a sentence without stuttering, it really was no wonder that he was single.

But Felix was looking at him like some unsolvable riddle and Hyunjin wasn't really sure what to do with that so he awkwardly cleared his throat and asked, "What about you?"

"Yeah." Felix said easily.

But the word simply didn't make sense to Hyunjin in this context. How on *earth* could an angel like Felix be single? The only plausible explanation was that the entire town had gone blind and didn't realize the eighth wonder of the world walking amongst them.

"But how? *Why*?" Hyunjin sputtered, unable to keep the questions to himself any longer.

"I dunno," Felix giggled, his eyes flashing down to his pretty pink fingernails, polish chipping on his middle finger and his thumb helping it along. "I just never found someone I was interested in like that."

Okay now *that* made sense. How could anyone be even remotely interesting or beautiful enough to interest a total ten like Felix? But what didn't make sense was the way he bit his lip and glanced up through his lashes at Hyunjin after he said it.

But before he could even entertain the idea of asking what it meant, the shy, bashful edge of Felix's eyes were softening. "That and, I mean, just…I don't think I'd be very fun to date."

And Hyunjin was right back to being gobsmacked.

"Not *fun*?" Hyunjin asked, sounding a little too horrified by this revelation but he *was.* How did Felix ever think he *wasn't* the life of the party? How could he not realize the way he lit up even the dullest of classrooms when he walked in?

The blond shrugged, looking alarmingly at peace with this. Like it was something he'd thought about and accepted over time.

“Yeah. Just…I dunno, being a hybrid is weird.” He shrugged again, not really answering Hyunjin's ill formed question but also still sort of answering it.

He answered it in the words he didn't say, shaded with context he's provided through body language. The way his tail wrapped around him securely, not letting a single thing touch it. The way he'd told Hyunjin he felt like he was on display; his classmates stared from afar without even *thinking* what it must be like for him.

Being caged was probably very lonely, no matter how many people were around you. No matter how many people smiled and took pictures and gushed over how cute you were, there was still the glass. There was still an enclosure that made you feel ‘other’.

And Hyunjin decided in that moment that he wanted to know Felix. Really, truly know him. As a man and as a hybrid and as a friend. He wanted to be that safe space that opened the door to his cage. He wanted him to feel *seen.*

He'd asked him once if it ever got lonely being a hybrid and he'd said yes. Hyunjin would do anything to make it stop.

“Weird isn't bad.” He stated confidently. “In fact, I rather like weird.”

“Yeah?” Felix asked, a blush starting to stain his cheeks as he fiddled with the lid on his mug again.

Hyunjin nodded with an assuredness he rarely ever felt. But the need to make sure Felix never doubted himself again was fueling a confidence in him. “Yeah. *Anyone* can do normal. It takes something special to be different.”

Felix looked up at him, his eyes shining with an inner light that Hyunjin didn't fully understand. But the brown of his eyes was so warm as he nodded, like coming to an agreement with himself as he smiled shyly up at him.

“Yeah. It really does.” He agreed, eyes boring into Hyunjin like he saw something he liked.

But that light in his eyes was extinguished like a feeble fire when a torrent of icy water came cascading over Felix's head.

The blond jumped, his stool toppling back onto the concrete with a hollow thud, his eyes wide with shock as Hyunjin's went to the

cackling boy who had materialized beside them.

“O-oh my God! Lix! You should have *seen* the look on your face!” He doubled over, bracing himself on his knees like it was the funniest thing he'd ever witnessed.

But Hyunjin wasn't laughing. Because Felix was frozen, lower lip trembling and sodden ears flattened to his head in the most heartbreaking way.

“What the fuck?” Hyunjin whispered, so beyond confused. On what fucking *planet* did someone like *Felix* get bullied?

“What the *fuck?”* He said again, louder. His eyes drilled into the other boy, finally catching his attention. “What's your problem?” He asked, truly wondering what on earth was wrong with him.

He watched as the other boy visibly paled, swallowing thickly in fear. But still, he tried. “Aw, come on, I was just kidding! Lix should be helping with the car wash, not working some lame bake sale.” He tried a smile that looked too taunting to be real. “I just wanted to make sure he felt included, that's all.”

“Ho-Jin…” Felix finally muttered, sounding absolutely exhausted.

Oh. So *this* was the prick who thought it was okay to pull Felix's tail? Some asshole on the cheer squad who couldn't admit he had a crush and flirt like a normal fucking person?

Hyunjin didn't care what rumors it started. It would be worth every last one.

He took a step forward, wishing for the heavy thud of the boots he wasn't wearing.

But that one step already had Ho-Jin backing up a step in retreat. “Hey, wow dude, calm down.” He said, hands up in surrender as he took another step back. “What are you gonna do? Knife me or something?”

He heard something like a little growl rumble out of Felix and his narrowed eyes glanced over to see the dripping blond scowling at Ho-Jin.

“Hyune would *never-”*

“You really want to find out?” Hyunjin interrupted, keeping his face steely.

His heart was fluttering at Felix trying to defend him but he'd take the rumors if it got this asshole to walk away.

Ho-Jin’s smile slowly flattened. He could *see* his mind working through his options and deciding to err on the side of caution. He took another step back with an awkward, unconvincing laugh before completely turning tail and running.

Hyunjin stared after him, rage boiling in his blood. He'd never been prone to anger before but this felt pretty justified.

“Hyunnie,” Felix whispered, his eyes wide and round like he *knew* what this might cost him. Because he knew who Hyunjin really was and he knew that these rumors hurt. And he *knew* that Hyunjin had done it for him.

“Don't worry about it, Lix.” He said simply. Because truly, he didn't want Felix to worry about anything ever. “I'm used to it.” He said with a shrug.

“But-”

He shook his head. “Nope. No buts. Let's get you dried off before you get sick.”

And with that, he was racing back to his car that was still waiting to get washed. He popped the trunk, so beyond thankful that his parents kept an emergency kit in the back, complete with a thick, scratchy blanket that, while not very soft, was warmer than the sun itself.

He pulled it free and slammed the trunk closed again before running back across the lot to a shivering blond. He looked so small, sitting hunched over in his stool.

His ears were plastered to his skull in displeasure, his tail *squeezing* his waist as if trying to offer comfort or warmth or both.

Hyunjin rounded the table, heart aching at the sight. He bit his bottom lip, not sure if he was crossing about a million lines but God, he just wanted to *help*.

“Here, let me…” he trailed off, swallowing nervously as he raised the blanket up with shaking hands and wrapped it around the blond's

shoulders.

He watched in amazement as Felix's round eyes watched him, staying on his face like he found comfort there. Like he *trusted* him. And maybe he did, maybe he didn't but Hyunjin never wanted to give him a reason to *not* trust him.

He patted his cheeks dry with the softest of taps and he *swore* he could see the blurry suggestion of freckles under his makeup. But whatever primer he used was doing it's fucking job and he couldn't be sure he wasn't just imagining it all because being this close to Felix was making him lightheaded.

Slowly, he lifted the blanket higher until it draped over his soaked hair and ears like a hood and with a deep breath, he began to dry his hair carefully.

Felix sighed, so lightly Hyunjin nearly thought he'd dreamed it. But his shoulders dropped a little too, making Hyunjin think that maybe he hadn't completely overstepped.

He slowly and methodically massaged the blanket against his scalp, trying to be gentle and considerate of his ears. He knew he didn't like his tail touched but he wasn't sure about the ears.

Tentatively, feeling his heart kicking behind his ribs, he moved his hands over to brush the base of his ears, still flattened to his head.

When Felix didn't flinch or ask him to stop, he decided to be brave. Finding courage in the lovely way Felix's eyes watched him, he slowly cupped the soft ears under the blanket and applied that same gentle rhythm to them.

Felix sighed again, this time a little deeper, humming as his eyes tried to flutter shut.

“Is this okay?” Hyunjin asked softly. He didn't want to make Felix uncomfortable but the sight of his fluffy ears all soggy and sad made him ache.

“Mmm,” Felix hummed happily. “Feels nice,” he admitted in a quiet voice.

It was silly because just across the small lot was a rowdy crowd of cheerleaders and boisterous onlookers. There was wild laughter and shrieks of joy and dismay as water splashed on the chilly autumn

morning. But Hyunjin felt like all of that was behind a wall of water, dulled in the background as all his attention was pulled to the blond under his fingers.

Tentatively, Hyunjin scratched his blunt black nails at the base of Felix's ears, trying to get the roots dry.

But Felix giggled, his ears twitching happily and finally standing back up into the cute little triangles they were supposed to be.

Intrigued, Hyunjin scratched again, earning him another giggle before Felix cut it off, pulling back a little. "Sorry," he muttered, looking embarrassed.

But Hyunjin's eyes were wide with delight. "Do you…like ear scratches?"

The blond's cheeks erupted into a blush, his eyes finally falling away from Hyunjin and to the fingers fumbling in his lap nervously. "It's so weird, I know." He muttered, sounded damn near disappointed in himself.

And Hyunjin just could *not* allow that. Without thinking, he reached out and scratched at the base of his ear again. "It's not weird. It's cute." He assured him, offering another scratch.

The ears perked up under his hands and he couldn't help the giddy feeling that bubbled up inside when Felix giggled again, a shy smile breaking across his lips.

So Hyunjin doubled down, one hand on each ear. "They're so *soft,"* He giggled. Because damn, either Felix used a conditioner from heaven or his fur was made of silk.

"Hyune," Felix giggled, squirming a little in his spot. His blush seemed happier now. Less shy and more warm.

Hyunjin crowded in a little closer, his own smile widening at Felix's wind chime laugh.

"What? They *are!*" He insisted.

"Hyunjinnie!" Felix giggled, his smile so big and his eyes pressed up into little crescents. He reached out blindly, gripping Hyunjin's forearms.

“Jin Jin, *stoooop!”* His whine was ruined by his giggles, bright and poppy and so very contagious.

Hyunjin felt his heart stumble in his chest.

Jin Jin.

Now that was new. No one had ever called him Jin Jin before. But damn, he liked the idea of Felix having a special nickname for him.

The brunette finally relented, letting his hands fall back down, the blond still tethered to his wrists.

Giggles still fresh on their tongues, Felix looked at him with such open adoration that Hyunjin nearly choked.

“You're such a sweetheart,” Felix said softly, “How anyone could think otherwise is beyond me.”

Hyunjin felt warmth flood his face as those tiny fingers scorched into his skin. God, he hoped the smell of his burning flesh wouldn't ruin the moment.

“Well, I don't care what anyone else thinks,” he whispered, wishing so desperately that he could find enough courage to slip his hands into Felix’s. That he could find a way to explain to him that he used to care what others thought; he'd spent so many years being so silently hurt by their judgements. But all of a sudden, it didn't hurt so much. Because here? With Felix? He felt *seen.* And that was all that mattered.

“As long as *you* know who I am. I think that's enough.” He said, voice soft and shaking.

Being seen had been all he'd ever wanted but it had also been something he'd feared.

This time it will be different.

But it could only be different if he let it.

Felix smiled up at him, his grin so warm it could melt the chill right out of the air. “Oh Jin

Jin, I wanna know everything about you.” He said.

And Hyunjin wanted to tell him that he already knew more than most but his words evaporated off his tongue when he felt a soft fluff wrap

around his mid section, a gentle weight constricting shyly around him.

He glanced down just in time to catch the sight of Felix's *tail* wrapping around Hyunjin like it wanted to be involved in their moment.

But in the next second, the fluffy tail was pulling away rapidly while Felix stuttered, “Sorry! I uh…it likes you, I guess.” He laughed a little awkwardly but didn't look away from Hyunjin's wide eyes.

“It's no worries,” Hyunjin assured him, trying to calm his heart. He noticed the way Felix's tail tended to stay close, wrapped around his own waist or leg so it wouldn't get stepped on or pulled. He noticed how careful it was when Felix squatted to dig through his locker, wary of all the wandering feet that could squash it. He remembered the way it lifted at the end like a candy cane that forgot its stripes so it wouldn't even brush the *floor*.

But here it was, tentatively reaching out to hold Hyunjin like it found *safety* in him.

Felix cleared his throat and moved back, his hands unclasping from Hyunjin's wrists as he sat up straight in his stool. Taking the queue from the blond, Hyunjin took a step back as well, giving them both a little room to breathe.

“So uh, do you like…have control over your tail or does it just do its own thing?” He'd been curious and now seemed like a decent segue to ask.

“I mean, I *can* control it but I usually don't really think about it.” Felix said with a shrug. “It's like breathing. If you think about it, you can control it. Otherwise, it just kind of happens on its own in the background.”

Hyunjin nodded.

He stood, still behind the bakesale table and literally twiddling his thumbs. He didn’t have a follow up question and, if he was being honest, he felt like he’d already been gifted too much today. He felt like asking for anything more would be greedy or earn him some bad juju or something.

Plus, the bakesale part of this fundraiser didn’t seem very popular. Not when there were soaking wet cheerleaders on the other end of the parking lot. Well, technically he had a soaking wet cheerleader over

here too but it wasn't really the same.

"So, what's good?" Hyunjin asked, motioning awkwardly to the table full of baked goods. There were pies and cookies, cakes and brownies. It was an endless sea of sugar and if nothing else, Hyunjin thought he could help the bake sale out by supporting the cause…whatever it was. He wasn't totally sure actually. He was just here for Felix, but the blond didn't need to know that for certain.

"Any recommendations?" Hyunjin asked, finger trailing over a plastic baggie filled with something that looked like homemade truffles.

"Hmmm, well it depends what you like!" Felix chirped, clutching the blanket around his shoulders like a cape and moving to the other end of the table to show off his wares. "Do you like chocolate? Or do you prefer fruity things?"

"Um…chocolate." He decided. "I mean, I like both but chocolate sounds good right now."

The blond nodded, eyes flying over the table. "With or without nuts?"

"Without," Hyunjin said, his face automatically scrunching up in distaste.

Felix giggled, catching the reaction and nodding. "Noted. Okay last question and it's *very* important so listen carefully, okay Jin Jin?"

Hyunjin nodded like his life depended on it. He looked solidly into Felix's eyes, determined to show his attention.

"Sprinkles or no?"

He's been expecting a question about allergies maybe but of course not. Of *course* Felix would be more interested in Hyunjin's opinions on something fun and colorful.

"Sprinkles." He said with certainty.

Felix's eyes lit up like a fucking Christmas tree and the smile that took over his lips was breathtaking. It was incredible how such a little thing could light him up like that and Hyunjin sort of loved that about him.

He clapped his hands excitedly in front of his chest, looking besotted. "Oh good answer! Okay, then I recommend these!" He lunged for a

plate of decadent brownies, covered in rainbow sprinkles.

Hyunjin licked his lips before nodding and pulling his wallet out. “Done. How much for three?” He figured his parents would appreciate the gift.

“Well, they're a dollar a piece but I'll give you a discount for being my hero.” He said with a little smile, tugging on the blanket wrapped around him.

Hyunjin felt heat flood his face. “You don't need to do that, Lix.” He wasn't sure when he'd started shortening his name but the way Felix didn't stop him or correct him made him feel special. Made him feel like he'd passed some sort of friendship test.

“I know I don't, but I want to!” Felix said happily. “So three dollars will get you the whole plate.”

Hyunjin's eyes widened. “How many plates are there?”

Felix's eyes widened in return. “...three?” He said slowly, eyebrows raised in curiosity, waiting for Hyunjin's next move.

The brunette merely nodded and set $10 on the table. “I'll take them all.” He said without a hint of doubt. It was dumb and he wasn't really sure what he was going to do with 3 dozen brownies but here he was, acting like this alone would save the bake sale and make Felix fall madly in love with him.

But the blond just giggled and gave Hyunjin his change before carefully stacking the plates in a paper bag. And while there was no declaration of undying love, Felix did smile a little bashfully at him and that sort of felt like a win too.

Hyunjin was about to ask if Felix wanted to share a brownie with him when Changbin came jogging over, sweating despite the early autumn chill and the short sleeves of his cherry red cheer uniform shoved up over his obscenely large delts.

“Hey Hyunnie! Car is all clean; washed it myself.” He looked mighty proud of himself as he held out the keys and dropped them into Hyunjin's palm.

The taller man felt himself deflate a little. He'd hoped to stay a little longer but with his car sparkling in the distance, it wouldn't make a lot of sense for him to continue hanging around. Not unless he wanted

to be painfully obvious. Which like, sure, he probably already was but *still.* He could at least *pretend* to have some self respect and not openly simp in public.

“Yah, what the hell happened to you, sunshine?” Changbin finally noticed Felix's blanket cape and still slightly damp hair.

The blond merely rolled his eyes, already looking tremendously over it. “What do you think?”

Changbin took a whole second to think before sighing, sounding exhausted. “Fucking Ho-Jin, right?”

“Ding ding ding,” Felix chirped dully with another eye roll.

Changbin’s face went flat in a way Hyunjin had never seen. He was normally sporting a fervent grin or a near constant curve to his lips. Where Hyunjin had resting “I'm going to murder you” face, Changbin had resting “free hugs” face.

It was odd to see that smile drop.

“Where is he?” He said, voice low as he twisted to survey the other side of the lot.

But Felix dismissed it. “Don't worry about it, Binnie. Jin Jin already scared him off for me.” He said the second part with a shy smile at Hyunjin.

The brunette smiled shyly in return and fought the urge to duck his head. Instead, he turned to look at Changbin to find a curious yet pleased look in his face.

The shorter man gave Hyunjin a quick once over before nodding with certainty. “Yeah, I bet he did.”

“But hey,” Felix said, eyes resolute as he looked to Changbin with purpose. “If you hear any rumors about Hyunjin on Monday, don't believe them, okay?” He flicked those big brown eyes to Hyunjin, a little blush blooming as he added, “He's a total sweetheart.”

Changbin laughed, peeking inside the bag Hyunjin held to get a look at his selections. “Well of course he is. Mean people don't pick sweets with sprinkles on them.” He stated this like it was an absolute fact that everyone knew. Like they taught it in school or the Bible or something.

Felix laughed, “While I agree with you, you're sounding like Jisung.”

Changbin groaned and used Hyunjin's shoulder to lean against, resting his head on his shoulder in fake despair. “It's what happens when you have *three* classes with him!”

Changbin groaned on Hyunjin's shoulder while the taller man stood stalk still, determined to be the best support structure the world had ever seen. It felt like another friendship test and he wasn't going to fuck it up.

“My transformation is nearly complete. Next thing you know, I'll be helplessly in love with Minho and in utter denial about it.”

Hyunjin gasped and Changbin straightened up to look at his profile with a curious smile.

Thankfully, Felix answered for him. “Jin Jin is team Minsung. It took him less than a week to figure out they're mad for each other.”

Changbin cackled. “Oh totally. It's giving friends to lovers trope for sure.”

Hyunjin couldn't have held in his gasp if he'd *tried. “*You know about *tropes?”* Hyunjin said in awe.

And Changbin merely threw his head back and laughed gleefully. He tossed an arm over Hyunjin's shoulders like it wasn't a huge fucking deal and squeezed him into his solid side.

“Sure do! I'm not just some dumb jock like, Channie! I have *dimension.”* He stated snuggly.

“Hey, Channie is not some dumb jock!” Felix defended.

But Changbin, arm still over Hyunjin's shoulders, just shrugged. “He plays every sport known to man.”

“Well sure, but he also writes songs so he's got dimensions too!”

“Oh he's got *dimensions* alright. Have you *seen* his ass-”

“Ew Binnie! Don't be gross! That's basically my big brother!”

But their banter melted into the background as the new information rolled around and around Hyunjin's head. Chan wrote songs? Which were basically poetry to music. Did he sing? Could he play

instruments? What kind of music was it? Was it rap? Pop? Lyrical ballads? All of the above? What twilight zone had he stepped in where a jock was out here writing songs too?

Had he really done it? Had he finally found people who might see the soft sides of him and just let him be?

His mind was whirling around and around this point when he felt a squeeze to his shoulder. His head whipped to the side to catch Changbin grinning at him and finally sliding his arm off his shoulders.

“Well, I better get back to it! It was good to see you, Hyunnie. Thanks for stopping by and supporting!”

Hyunjin almost asked *supporting what?* But caught himself before he exposed what a loser he was and his ulterior motives.

“O-of course,” he said, mentally face palming when he stuttered.

But Changbin merely continued grinning before waving and making his way back across the lot. “See you on Monday!” He called over his shoulder.

Hyunjin waved weakly back at him, even though he was facing away, still wanting to be polite.

It was in that moment that a small group of students appeared behind Hyunjin, eyeing the bake sale and whispering being their hands to each other about the new kid.

Hyunjin could *feel* their eyes and he felt his shoulders cave in a little. Sometimes he wished he wasn't so tall, so noticeable.

“I'll get out of your hair,” he murmured, lifting the little bag of treats with a thin smile. “Thanks for the recommendation.”

“Of course!” Felix said, eyes glued to Hyunjin's slow steps back, completely ignoring the potential customers. “You gotta let me know if they're good, okay?”

Hyunjin nodded, turning to leave when Felix's voice rang out, loud and proud.

“Thanks again for your help, Jin Jin! You're my hero!”

Hyunjin froze, his heart beating solidly in his chest. He glanced at the

other students, taking in their wide stares and surprised looks. But they didn't matter like Felix did so he looked back over his shoulder to drink in the blond's bright smile, his ears finally standing back up like they should.

Hyunjin smiled again, this time feeling warmer and more genuine. Less defeated. “Of course, Lix. I'll see you Monday?”

“You better!” Felix quipped before finally turning to address the other students.

Hyunjin felt his heart warm, even as he walked away. It was nice to be wanted. It was nice to feel seen. At least it was when Felix was the one looking.

For the first time ever, Hyunjin couldn't wait for Monday to come around.

Chapter End Notes

I'd call that fundraiser a success! Slowly but surely, they're getting more and more comfortable with each other ❤

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> Okay for the first time ever, I feel like Sunday came REALLY fast! I still haven't even responded to last chapters comments! But oh well, onward and upward! Thank you so, so much for all of your continued support; I don't deserve how sweet you all are ❤❤❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Felix didn't show up on Monday.

He wasn't at his locker in the morning and Hyunjin would know because he'd casually hung around it until the last possible second, having to *sprint* to his first hour so as to not be late. He'd made it, out of breath and confused by Felix's absence.

The brunette spent his first three classes chewing on his nails and staring down the clock hand like he could intimidate it into moving faster around and around the face.

Had he overdone it on Saturday? Had he come off as clingy or needy or annoying? Had he driven away, high on the brightness of Felix's smile and missed the way Felix and Changbin had laughed at him in the rearview mirror?

But that didn't make any sense. Because sure, Hyunjin might not have been very convinced that he was capable of making genuine friends but he had plenty of faith in those two. They'd been nothing but honest and kind to him and even *imagining* such slander made him feel like he needed to apologize to them.

When the bell rang at the end of third period, he was up and out of his seat, racing towards calculus like it was the love of his life. He was the first student to burst through the door, the teacher looking up with raised eyebrows and nodding slowly at him.

Hyunjin returned the nod respectfully and folded himself into his seat, eyes *nailed* to Felix's chair as he not so patiently awaited his arrival.

But he never showed.

The five minute bell rang. And then the last warning bell. And then

the actual bell. And

then class started and Felix's seat remained empty and Hyunjin was nervous that the class would be able to hear the sound of his heart cracking in half over the drone of their teacher's lecture.

It was ridiculous but he *missed* him. Felix's smile was like a drug. One hit and he was already hooked. He'd been sober for over 24 hours now and he *hated* it. He was jonesing for that next hit and he had zero idea how to handle that.

He tried his best to take advantage of the blond's absence to actually pay attention to the teacher's lesson but it all sounded like a foreign language to him and he sighed in relief when the bell rang. He'd done his best to take detailed notes but he'd need Minho's help to decode and translate them.

He followed the flow of his classmates to the cafeteria, a noticeable void next to him. He found his eyes pitifully looking to his right time and time again, despite *knowing* there was no bubbly blond there.

He sighed heavily as he slid his tray along the metal rails, collecting lord knows what on his plate. He wasn't really hungry and he definitely wasn't paying attention.

He drifted out of the line after paying and dug down *deep* to find the little shreds of confidence that sat on the floor of his soul. He wanted to ask the guys where Felix was but that would require him approaching on his own. And while they'd been nothing but kind and accepting, Hyunjin couldn't help but wonder if that was only the case because he'd been escorted by a member of their group every other time.

He took a deep breath and walked toward the table, fighting the way his shoulders tried to cave in with each step but only with a little success.

"Hey man!" Chan's eyes lit up upon seeing him and he patted the seat next to him.

Hyunjin let out a long breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. "Hey," He offered shyly, sitting down.

Chan beamed at him but it was Jeongin across the table who asked, "How was your weekend?"

Hyunjin shrugged, not sure if they'd be interested to know he's spent all of Sunday waxing poetic about Felix in his diary, trying to process the *exact* shade of his eyes in the sunlight.

So instead, he just said, "It was fine. Too short."

Jeongin smiled and nodded. "Always."

Hyunjin tried a little smile back, wanting to return the kindness because he *knew* he wasn't much of a conversationalist but here Jeongin was, smiling at him and not teasing him for not knowing what to say next.

"Hey, you gonna eat that?" Changbin asked suddenly, leaning in against Hyunjin's other side and eyeing the mystery slop on his plate.

The taller man shook his head. Even if he *had* been hungry, he wouldn't have been tempted.

"Can I have it?"

"Dude, seriously? Leave him alone." Seungmin said from across the table, a *very* unimpressed look weighing his face down.

"What?!" Changbin crowed, looking absolutely astonished by this reaction.

But based on how Minho and Jisung both rolled their eyes (in sync, like fucking soulmates, mind you), this was not an uncommon occurrence.

"Let the poor guy breathe before you start trying to steal his food!" Minho said.

"Yeah, you'll scare him off!" Jisung added, eyes flicking over to Hyunjin. "And if you scare him off, Lixie will be so *pissed.*"

And as much as Hyunjin would love to dig into what the fuck that meant, he 1. Didn't

have the confidence to ask and 2. Figured now was probably the best segue he'd get for obtaining the answers he *desperately* needed.

"S-speaking of uh…of Felix. Where uh…where is…he?"

Oh god, did he sound creepy? Did they think he was some kind of stalker? What if they

closed ranks around Felix and never let Hyunjin see him ever again? He'd have to learn to fight, that's what. He'd start taking karate or someth-

"Sick." Changbin said around a messy bite of pizza, his single word saving Hyunjin from the spiral he'd started down.

"Sick?" He repeated, not sure why he was surprised. After all, he'd had a bucket of water

dumped on him in nearly freezing temperatures. Of *course* he was sick.

Changbin nodded, eyes going a little steely. "Yeah. Fucking Ho-Jin and his dumb fucking pranks." He shook his head, visibly displeased.

Hyunjin frowned alongside him, images of a sick Felix starting to plague his mind. His little red nose, all sniffly and sad. The bags under those perfect eyes, trying to shove his secret freckles out of the way.

"Seriously though, that guy needs to grow the fuck up," Minho grumbled from down the table. He was moodily picking at his salad, his glare aimed at it and threatening to wilt it. "I get he has a crush or whatever but he doesn't need to *harass* Lix."

"He'll grow up some day." Chan said, sounding tired and almost like he didn't even believe himself when he said it. But his exhausted eyes swung to the side and landed on Hyunjin, warmth starting to well up in them. "But until that day, thank you Hyunjin."

Chan reached out to clap his hand down on Hyunjin's shoulder and the brunette couldn't help but stare back with wide, confused eyes.

"For what?" He asked.

Chan just smiled back at him with something akin to pride in his eyes. "Binnie told me

how you stood up for Lix. And don't get me wrong, Lix can stand up for himself when he wants to but…still. I appreciate it."

Hyunjin shrugged under the sturdy weight of Chan's hand. "It was nothing." He said, because in so many ways, it really was nothing. He didn't have much to offer Felix but he could always listen when he spoke and he could *always* be in his corner. It felt like the bare minimum he could offer an angel like Felix.

“Plus, Lix stood up for me too.” He pointed out, wanting to make sure Felix got his credit too.

Chan raised an eyebrow, a little smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Hyunjin assured him. “He told Binnie not to believe the rumors about me.” His eyes flashed to Changbin, nervous that he’d overstepped by using his nickname. But it had just rolled off the tongue so effortlessly.

“Oh, you mean the one about how you pulled a knife on Ho-Jin in the parking lot on Saturday?” Jisung said, sounding far too casual for the allegation he was tossing around.

Hyunjin’s shoulders slumped, wondering if Chan noticed as it happened right under his hand. “Yeah. That one.” He said softly.

“Well of *course* it’s fake!” Jisung giggled. “You wouldn’t let me ride on your motorcycle because you didn’t have an extra *helmet*. Mr. Safety First doesn’t seem like someone who carries a knife on him.”

Hyunjin’s eyes flew up from the table to catch Jisung’s open smile. He looked so happy and confident as he smiled full force back at Hyunjin. It was so stunning that Hyunjin felt it bleed into his own, tugging at the corner of his lips in disbelief.

“I-I don’t.” He clarified for good measure. He didn’t want to leave any room for ambiguity.

Chan clapped his hand down on Hyunjin’s shoulder with a wide grin. Hyunjin, to his own credit, only flinched a *little* bit.

“Glad to hear it. Otherwise, as class president, I’d have to report you.” He winked even though Hyunjin was pretty sure he was dead serious.

He offered a slightly shaky smile and decided that maybe he could try to eat some of the slop on his plate. Not because it looked good, oh god no, but because the knots in his stomach had finally eased a little.

Carefully and quietly, he took little bites, listening to the conversations ebb and flow around them. It was fascinating, in a way. He listened politely as Chan and Binnie talked about lat pull downs and progressive overload. He listened to Seungmin and Jeongin go over their chemistry notes. And he could *see* how Minho and Jisung

would slip off in their own little world in the middle of a crowded cafeteria and god, how he *wanted* that.

He knew he and Felix weren't the same, not by a long shot, but still. It made him miss him. He missed how the whole school would fall away when he looked at Hyunjin across the table with that bright smile and sparkling eyes.

But then he thought of those bright smiles and sparkling eyes shivering under layer upon layer of heavy blankets. He thought of his ears drooping in that sad little way they had on Saturday when they'd been drenched and all of a sudden, those knots tightened in his stomach again.

He pushed his tray away, appetite gone. He glanced to the side and saw Binnie eyeing his plate. Wordlessly, he slid it over to him with a raised brow and the other boy's answering smile would have made you think he'd offered him five star cuisine instead of mystery meat.

"You sure?" He asked, fork hovering over the food.

Hyunjin nodded. "Yeah. Not very hungry."

"Can't relate," Changbin laughed, shoveling the food onto his plate happily. But his eyes flicked back up curiously when Hyunjin didn't even attempt a nervous chuckle back. And Hyunjin *swore,* he could see this little thing click into place.

"He's gonna be okay. It's just a little cold." He said softly, eyes kind as he leaned over and nudged Hyunjin's shoulder with his own.

The brunette felt himself blush bright red and he ducked his head, missing his long hair now more than ever. "I know."

Because he did. He really did. It's not like he thought he was going to die or anything. Hyunjin could recognize that he could be dramatic but even *he* could accept that a common cold wasn't going to take Felix out.

"I just miss him."

The words were out before he even noticed it. His blush deepened impossibly. He was sure his cheeks had invented a new, never before seen shade of red by now.

But instead of harsh laughter or a biting comment about how pathetic

he was, he heard a sweet little coo, followed by a softer little nudge to the shoulder.

“I bet he misses you too.”

Hyunjin couldn’t help but scoff. “Doubt it.”

“No, really!” Binnie said. “He couldn’t stop talking about how happy he was that you showed up on Saturday.”

The taller man’s head shot up at that. “R-really?”

Binnie smiled a mile wide and nodded happily. “Really. The whole ride home he was talking about how happy he was that you came.”

“Well of course I did!” Hyunjin said immediately. “I told him I would.” If he said he would do something, he would do everything in his power to get it done. If he wanted Felix to trust him then the first step was making sure he stuck to his word. It wasn’t that novel of a concept.

“Oh! Are we talking about how Hyunnie came to the car wash?” Jisung piped up from down the table. “I thought I saw you! Sorry, I would have said hi but I was busy.”

“Busy? You were trying to steal all the sponges!” Jeongin said, eyes narrowed.

“I wasn’t *stealing* them! I was borrowing them!”

“Borrowing them? So you were going to give them back?”

Jisung nodded. “Yes. Through a series of riddles-”

“Not everything needs to be a scavenger hunt!” Jeongin exploded, sounding exasperated and fond in the same breath. Hyunjin had the nagging feeling that this was *not* the first time they’d had this conversation.

But the warning bell rang, letting them know it was time to disperse back to class and Hyunjin was left wondering just how many scavenger hunts Jisung had tried to orchestrate in their high school careers.

“Yah, Hyunjin!”

The aforementioned man looked up to find Minho standing, one hand

holding his tray and the other pulling his backpack strap over. “We still on for tutoring after class?”

He hurriedly nodded, thankful beyond belief that Minho had said something. He’d been so lost in his grief over Felix and the lulling pull of the conversational tides around him, it had completely slipped his mind.

Minho nodded once in return, satisfied with the answer.

Hyunjin’s next two classes went quickly enough but when study hall rolled around, Hyunjin could *feel* the void next to him. He’d become so spoiled, so quickly. He kept expecting to hear the little screech of a chair being scooted closer or the soft sounds of a tail swooshing lazily. But all he heard was the dull roar of the students chatting around him and the ticking of the clock moving too slow.

He hunched over his science homework, deciding to leave his math struggles to the professionals (Minho) and offer himself a little break in these trying times.

He was able to get a good chunk of work done before the bell rang. He silently slid his book and folder back into his backpack, missing the chatter he'd grown so accustomed too. He sighed, struggling to understand how the silence he'd been so used to felt so foreign now. Perhaps that was just a part of progress that no one talked about; the part where your old safety blankets caught fire and burned you a little.

He made his way to the library, his heart picking up in anxious speed even as he told himself over and over again that Minho wouldn’t be doing this if he didn’t want to. Out of all of the guys he’d met so far, Minho seemed like the least likely to humor *anyone,* even as a favor to his friend.

He found the brunette sitting at the same table as last week, a notebook open in front of him that he was scrutinizing with care, occasionally making little scribbles in it when something seemed to displease him.

“Hey,” Hyunjin said quietly, sitting down across from the other boy and leaning his backpack against the old wooden leg of the table.

Minho’s eyes darted up and he nodded at Hyunjin. He didn’t smile but somehow his eyes looked friendly when he said hey back and Hyunjin felt like either he’d made some real progress with this whole friend

thing or started straight up hallucinating.

Honestly, he'd be fine with that if it helped him to push through his social awkwardness.

"Here," Minho said, sliding the notebook from earlier across the table, as Hyunjin pulled out his book and homework, searching for a pencil swimming somewhere in the base of his bag.

"What's this?" He asked, gently folding back the worn cover to reveal row upon row of neat and tidy notes.

"My notes from last year." He said with a nonchalant shrug. "I don't need them anymore but I thought you might find them useful."

His eyes flicked to Hyunjin's own open notebook, taking in the sloppy, loopy script and hurried corrections and endless doodles lining the edges and smirked. "Yours are atrocious."

But the way he said it didn't sound like an insult. It sounded almost fond. Hyunjin couldn't help but chuckle a little and nod. "Yeah, they are." He agreed easily. "I just get so frazzled and I never know if I'm writing down the important parts or not."

Minho's smirk grew but he nodded in earnest. "It's not about writing down what you think is important. It's about writing down what you think you won't remember."

"But what if I can't remember any of it?" Hyunjin challenged.

Minho chuckled, his eyes squinting up in a way that made his normally stoic face seem a million degrees warmer.

"Well then you're lucky you have me now."

If Hyunjin hadn't been so stunned by those words, he probably would have started crying. But thankfully, his utter shock saved him from embarrassing himself into oblivion. And thankfully, Minho jumped straight into their tutoring session after that.

Determined to show his new potential friend that he honored his time and energy, Hyunjin tried his hardest to pay attention and absorb every single word he shared. At one point, he even asked a clarifying question and earned a 'good question' from Minho.

Math was terrible still but it wasn't so bad when the person across the

table from you was kind and quiet and willing to help you.

He was just starting the last problem on his worksheet when Minho glanced at his phone, a dopey grin spreading over his lips as he tapped out a message. Hyunjin caught it out of his peripherals but he knew in an *instant* that it must be Jisung texting. Only that man could put *that* look on Minho's face.

Not a second later, Minho's phone vibrated loudly on the tabletop, skittering to the side before the brunette swiped it off the table with a terrified look shot towards the front desk. "*What?*" He hissed behind his hand upon answering.

Hyunjin kept his head tilted down, eyes on his work that had completely stalled out while he listened, eager for any movement on his new favorite ship.

"Jiji, no. I'm busy."

His eyes flicked to Hyunjin, biting his bottom lip. There were a few more nods and *m-hmms* and then Minho was hanging up with a little sigh that Hyunjin probably wasn't supposed to hear.

But he did. And he would *not* be the one to get between Minho and his one true love.

"I'm basically done," He said, gesturing to the half finished math problem. "You can go if you want to meet up with Jisung."

Minho shrugged and swatted the words away but Hyunjin, for perhaps the first time in his life, decided to put his foot down. Or at least *try*.

"No really, I wouldn't mind. Plus, I'm sure whatever he wants to do is way more fun than this." He laughed a little and watched as Minho shrugged again, a little smile starting to quirk the edges of his lips up.

"...he wants to get ice cream before it gets too cold." He finally muttered, the palest blush spreading hesitantly over his cheeks. "Which is bullshit because he'll still want to get ice cream even in January but whatever."

Hyunjin laughed, already starting to pack his things up to show that whether Minho decided to go or not, Hyunjin wasn't going to hold him back. "Sounds *way* more fun."

"I mean…sure. But he also just knows if I don't go then he'll eat too

much and get a stomach ache."

"Sounds like he needs you to share some ice cream with him." Hyunjin said carelessly, deciding if he was going to overstep, he'd rather do it in the support of love than any other reason.

He watched in delight as Minho's blush deepened. He wondered if he was imagining it. Imagining Jisung across that sticky plastic table, one dish, two spoons. It was a classic. One that Hyunjin dearly hoped would happen.

Hyunjin stood, feeling nearly proud of himself as he smiled down at the pink cheeked man and hauled his backpack up onto shoulder.

Minho watched him stand, a look on his face that Hyunjin wasn't sure what to do with. He wasn't sure what it meant but it looked vaguely like the look he would give a tough math problem.

"Okay, I will." Minho said, standing up and unzipping his backpack. He pulled out a stack of papers and held them out to Hyunjin with a grin. "But I'll need you to take Lix his homework then."

Hyunjin's mind grinded to a halt so fast, he had to wonder if Minho fucking *heard* it.

"I-I, y-you what?" He eloquently asked.

Minho's smirk only grew as he shoved the papers into Hyunjin's limp hands. "Chan collected any of the work he missed and I was going to drop it off. But now that I'm busy, I'll need someone else to do it for me."

The taller man felt his shoulders straighten, dragging his spine until it stacked properly. Because as *terrifying* as this was, he would really love to see Felix. He'd been missing him all day.

"But…I don't have his address."

The other boy merely rolled his eyes and held out his hand as he started to lead the way out of the library. Hyunjin scrambled to follow.

"Then give me your number and I'll text it to you."

"My…number?"

Minho sighed dramatically and re-emphasized his open and waiting

palm. “Give me your phone.” He commanded.

So Hyunjin dug his phone free from his pocket and handed it over. He watched with rapt attention as Minho added his number to his embarrassingly small contacts list and then texted himself.

With their numbers now shared, Minho wasted no time in texting Hyunjin the address he needed.

He probably looked pretty dumbfounded when his phone chimed, indicating a message from someone other than his mom or an appointment reminder from his dentist.

“Are…” Hyunjin trailed off, wondering how pathetic this question would sound. But he had to ask. “Are you sure Felix won't think it's weird? I-if *I'm* the one who shows up?”

He didn't want to start a fight between Minho and Felix if the blond didn't want his address shared with random guys he'd known for less than a week.

But Minho cackled, his eyes shining with something internal, not just the buttery sun that spilled over them as they left the drab halls behind.

“I think he'll be *very* happy to see you, Hyunnie.”

Heading Minho call him by a nickname felt like an honor. Binnie doing it was one thing but that guy was a walking teddy bear. Minho? He seemed like the type to take a long time to warm up to people, if he ever did. With nothing but respect, he seemed like the kind of guy who would decide he hated someone based on one thing they had said in passing ten years ago.

So to be *Hyunnie* to him? It felt big. It felt *earned.* He had zero idea how but still, he had to imagine that someone like Minho was not one to humor him simply to be nice.

“O-okay.” Hyunjin said, gathering all his courage to smile down at the boy walking next to him. “I'll go.”

Minho looked back at him, holding eye contact as he smiled and nodded. “Good.”

They reached the edge of the parking lot, Minho's car to the left and Hyunjin's motorcycle to the right. The taller boy offered a little wave

before turning towards his bike.

“Hey. Hyunjin?”

The brunette paused, turning back around with raised eyebrows.

Minho bit his bottom lip, seemingly contemplating what he was going to say before nodding to himself. “Thanks again. For helping Lix out at the fundraiser. I try to keep an eye on him, especially when Ho-Jin is around but…”

Hyunjin smiled a little and finished his sentence for him. “But you had your hands full with Jisung.”

And instead of narrowing his eyes and making some snarky remark he merely shrugged and offered a tired laugh. “Yeah.” He admitted before getting back to his main point.

“Lix doesn't normally latch on to people so quickly. He's usually more…wary. More, I don't know…cautious?”

Felix? The same boy who had gleefully slithered between Hyunjin and his locker, eager to see his locker decor? The same boy who had spent nearly thirty minutes giving him a detailed keychain tour the first day he ever met him? The same boy whose precious tail had tried to wrap around him and told him - and *only him* - that he purred?

“But the moment he saw you, he decided he wanted you around.” Minho stated, his brow a little furrowed, a conflicted look on his face that verged on the softer side. “It kind of freaked me out honestly. When he asked if Chan could use his class president powers to move your lunch to match ours, I was worried. Because of…well, the rumors about you.”

That he sold drugs. That he stole cigarettes from the convenience store. That he carried knives and skipped class and enjoyed bare knuckle boxing in his free time or whatever.

But those words didn't sting like they normally might have because Felix had been the one to ask Chan to move his lunch? It had been *Felix?* But how? They hadn't even *met* until lunch!

“Wait, what? Felix…*he* wanted me to have lunch with you guys?”

Minho paused, momentarily confused by the direction of the conversation before a smug little knowing smile pulled his lips and he

hummed in affirmation. “Mhm. I guess he saw you in the parking lot that morning and wanted to get to know you. Asked Chan if he could pull some strings.” Minho laughed, delighted by the blush flooding Hyunjin's face. “Normally, Chan wouldn't even entertain it but who could say no to Felix?”

Hyunjin's mind was spinning around and around the idea that *Felix* had simply seen him and decided he wanted to know him.

It was so, so…*romantic.*

He was trying his hardest not to melt but all he could focus on was how badly he wanted to *see* him now.

“So anyways, thanks. For not being what the rumors said and being nice to Lix.” Minho said, clearing his throat like the genuine words made him uncomfortable.

“It's no problem. Really.” Hyunjin said, not sure what else he could say.

But it turned out he didn't need to because Minho's phone sounded its shrill cry, no doubt Jisung calling by the goofy look that took over his face.

“Go before Jisung gets worried or eats too much ice cream.” He said with a smile that Minho returned.

“Alright, alright. Tell Lix I said hi and to get well soon.”

With a simple wave, he turned to leave and Hyunjin eagerly mounted his bike, reviewing the GPS instructions carefully until he was almost sure he could navigate there in his sleep.

He used the rumble of his bike to soothe his tingling nerves as he made his way down familiar streets until he turned into a quiet one he'd never noticed before.

It wasn't all that far from his house, in fact, he'd run by this street plenty of times over the summer. He'd never ventured down it but just the idea that he'd been so close to Felix all those weeks before school started made his romance obsessed brain start spinning around ideas like fate.

He parked in the street, for the first time in his life, worried that someone's parents might not approve of his motorcycle.

Which then so rudely reminded Hyunjin that Felix mostly likely lived with some kind of parent or guardian. A parent or guardian who might open the door and see Hyunjin's leather jacket and pierced eyebrow and shaved head and ask him to never talk to their son ever again.

He swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat, wishing beyond all belief that he could change clothes or spritz some cologne or that he wore glasses that made him look more studious and less like a delinquent.

He set his helmet on the seat of his motorcycle and needlessly ran his hand through his hair, as if he was trying to comb all one inch of it into some kind of order.

He walked up the front driveway, pausing to double check the address to the one Minho had texted. Confirming he was at the right place, he walked up the front steps and onto the creaky wood of the front porch. That chilly breeze followed him, wrapping around the wind chime hung off to his side and filling the space with the delicate sound of metal on musical metal.

Hyunjin took a steadying breath, wondering if it would be better to ring the doorbell, drop the homework on the step and run.

But then he thought of the impression it could leave on Felix's parents. He thought of the blond himself opening the door, tired and not feeling well and watching Hyunjin ride off without so much as a hello.

He thought about how Felix himself wanted to get to know Hyunjin so much so that he'd asked his friend to help make it happen.

If Felix could be brave then so could Hyunjin.

He rang the doorbell and took a step back, not wanting to crowd the door. After a few moments, he heard a shuffling from inside the house, what sounded like the soft creak of someone walking down old stairs.

He held his breath until the blond himself opened the door and the visual punched all of Hyunjin's hoarded air out of his lungs.

There he was, teddy bear slippers on, swimming in a hoodie and sweats that were two sizes too large, hair a fluffy mess and thick glasses perched on the end of his pink, sniffly little nose.

And that would have been enough for Hyunjin to completely cease to function. Sincerely, the sheer adorableness was making his heart melt.

But that wasn't all because he'd been right. Felix *did* have freckles. And not just a gentle little smattering. Not some casual sprinkle. No, no, no he had a face full of summer darkened freckles littering his whole face. They danced over his cheeks, up and over his nose. They dotted so delicately around his eyes, some even falling on his eyelids that Hyunjin only noticed as Felix blinked repeatedly, probably stunned at having found Hyunjin on the other side of the door.

“You…y-you have freckles.” He meant to say it like a question but his intonation came out as more of a reverent whisper instead.

The blond's hands flew up to his cheeks, as if he'd forgotten their existence and would be able to feel them.

“O-oh. I…yeah.” Felix said, hands covering them with a tragic little furrow to his brow. Almost like he didn't like them.

And that simply wouldn't do.

“They're adorable.” Hyunjin said, his lips tipping into a nervous smile.

He watched with rapt attention as Felix's hands dropped and those freckles were drenched in a soft pink blush.

“Really?” Felix asked, his voice a little hoarse. “You don't think it makes my skin look dirty?”

Hyunjin stared at Felix with wide eyes. How could he ever think something like that? He'd been gifted stars!

“Of course not! I-its like you have sprinkles!”

He cringed a little at his awkwardly enthusiastic delivery but stopped when Felix’s eyes crinkled and a giggle poured out of him.

“I guess I never thought about it like that,” he admitted, eyes happy as he smiled up at Hyunjin. There was a sweet pause, one where he could feel a fondness radiating from Felix. It made his bones soft, his heart flutter.

“So um…why are you here?” Felix asked around a nervous sounding chuckle. His tail was wrapped around his waist, lazily swishing back

and forth until his little hands took hold, petting it and playing with the fur in a way that made Hyunjin supremely jealous.

Or *would* have if he wasn't immediately trying to justify his actions before the blond could file a restraining order against him.

“Oh! Right! Uh, so uh, Minho was gonna bring you your homework? But Jisung called and wanted to get ice cream? And I told him he should, so then he asked me to drop this off to you!” He'd slid his backpack off his shoulder, letting it thunk to the floor by his feet as he rummaged around inside and pulled the little packet loose.

He thrust it towards Felix with eager eyes that begged him not to think he was a stalker.

The blond accepted it easily, taking it with both hands as if it was a precious gift. But his eyes hurried back to Hyunjin's chapped and shivering hands, his round eyes narrowing ever so slightly as he asked, “Are you cold?”

Hyunjin was about to deny it when a piercing breeze hollowed him out, making him visibly shudder at the chill.

“I mean…maybe a little.” He admitted.

Felix’s lips dipped into a frown before he took a step back, gesturing inside the house. “Do you want to come in for a little bit and warm up?”

“Oh, no that's-”

“I promise, I'm probably not contagious! Here, I'll even put a mask on!” Felix said, nearly tripping over his too long sweats as he skidded out of sight for a moment and returned wearing a mask, freckles once again hidden.

Hyunjin already missed them.

“Lix,” he said softly, that little nickname sneaking its way back in. “You should probably be resting.”

He could *hear* his pout. “I've been resting all day! I'm *boooored*!” He whined, reaching out to grab one of Hyunjin's hands with both of his little ones.

Based on Felix's tone, he suspected the pout had turned to pleading

under his mask. “Please Jin Jin? Keep me company? Just for a little bit?”

How was he supposed to say no to that? When his eyes were the size of small islands, he had his little paws wrapped around Hyunjin's shaking hand.

“O-okay. But just a few minutes.” He said, letting a happy blond pull him inside. He had to admit, as he shut the front door behind him, that the warmth felt nice. It thawed his bones a little as he relished the heat.

He sighed as Felix let go of his hand and took a careful step back, adjusting his mask like he wanted Hyunjin to know he was trying really hard not to get him sick.

Honestly, Hyunjin would have been *honored* to share anything with Felix. Even a virus.

But that was not only pathetic but also disgusting so he didn't mention it. “So uh, where are you parents?” He asked instead.

“Work,” Felix said easily. “My mom wanted to stay home and take care of me but I told her not to waste her sick days.”

Hyunjin nodded but still felt a little knot of anxiety chewing at the base of his brain. “How *are* you feeling?”

“Better now that you're here.” Felix said with a cheesy wink and a giggle. But his laugh petered out too quickly and his little hands found his tail again, as if needing something to hold onto.

“Lix,” Hyunjin said, voice soft and hands aching to reach out.

The blond’s heavy eyes flicked up, looking at Hyunjin with such nakedness that he almost stumbled back a step. Was this trust? Was it always his heavy?

“I really do feel better now.” He said quietly, ringing his tail like a wet washcloth. “But I couldn't stop sneezing and my whole body felt achy earlier.” He shrugged like it didn't matter but it *did.*

Especially because this hasn't been his fault, not in the slightest.

“Fucking Ho-Jin,” Hyunjin muttered. He wondered if that asshole even knew that his stupid little prank had made Felix - the guy he

allegedly liked - sick.

Felix merely shrugged again, his shoulders sagging a little and Hyunjin swore he could see the exhaustion in his body.

Without a single thought, his hand was reaching out, desperate to offer a little comfort. To attempt to reciprocate the warmth Felix offered him.

His hand cradled the side of Felix's head, thumb sweeping out to pet along the fluffy shell of his ear. He watched in amazement as the blond melted under his touch.

His shoulders dropped, his tired eyes grew droopy and he angled his head to fit it more securely into Hyunjin's palm.

“I'm sorry you're not feeling well, Lix.” He said honestly. His short nails scratched the base of his ears, pulling a happy little sigh from the other boy.

“S’okay.” He mumbled, sounding sleepy and content as his head nudged against his hand, silently requesting more scratches.

They stood in silence, the dull ticking of a clock echoing from somewhere deep in the house. He wondered what lay behind the blond: framed photos of a little Felix, not yet grown into his tail? A freshly washed cheer uniform, hanging to dry? Perhaps a diary like Hyunjin's? One filled with hopes and dreams and delusions that made his heart race?

“How were the brownies?”

Hyunjin was ripped from his hazy little daydream by Felix's sudden, sleepy question. “Huh?”

“The brownies. From the bake sale? Did you like them?”

Before Hyunjin could even respond, his stomach growled for him, answering that question.

Felix's eyes widened over his mask before they squinted into tight crescents. “Is that a yes?”

Hyunjin nodded heartily. “They didn't even last the weekend.” And it was true. His parents had been just as guilty as him, forgoing any kind of nutrition on Sunday night and deciding to buy some ice cream

instead and have brownies for dinner. It had been magical, in all honesty. “I'll be chasing that high the rest of my life.”

Felix giggled. “I'm glad my recommendation was good!”

“Very,” the taller boy said, finally and begrudgingly removing his hand from Felix's soft ear. He mourned the loss but it wasn't like he could just stand in his foyer all night.

“I should probably get going,” he admitted, shuffling a little awkwardly. “I don't want my parents to worry.”

He appreciated Felix's caution but he wished that mask wasn't blocking out the sweet smiles he could imagine happening behind it. He hated how it concealed his freckles. He'd be completely fine with contracting a virus if he could just see Felix’s freckled face for a few more minutes.

“So sweet,” Felix muttered softly before reaching out once again to grip one of Hyunjin's hands with both of his.

“Thank you for bringing me my homework. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course! Happy to help.”

Felix raised an eyebrow and shuffled a little closer. “Help the cause that is Minho and Jisung?”

Hyunjin chuckled, feeling brave enough to loop a finger over Felix's and squeeze. “Exactly.”

The blond giggled, shuffling forward a little more, his ears perked up into happy little triangles. “Well…I'm glad it was you. I love Minho but…it's nice to see you. I…I know it sounds dumb but I kinda missed you.” Felix whispered the last part, a blush flooding the upper half of his face. But he didn't duck his head, he didn't look away. He held Hyunjin's eyes and said them directly to him.

So Hyunjin owed it to him to reciprocate, especially since it was nothing but the truth.

He squeezed his finger again. “I kinda missed you too.” He whispered back. It wasn't so bad being pathetic when you weren't the only one wearing your heart on your sleeve. In fact, it was kind of amazing.

Felix giggled before floating forward, using his grip on Hyunjin's hand

to balance as he popped up on his toes and pressed his masked lips to Hyunjin's cheek.

If Felix hadn't been holding onto him, he would have crashed to the floor but even now, he felt like might simply melt through his fingers.

It was fleeting and probably didn't even *count* as a kiss but *holy shit.*

Holy shit.

“Drive safe,” Felix giggled before pausing, head tilted to the side in question. “Ride? Ride safe?” He shrugged and took a step back, leaving Hyunjin to fall back against the door with a thud. His heart was hammering in his chest. He desperately wanted to ask if Felix had an extra mask he could borrow, just so he had something to cover his raging blush.

But that would be too obvious so instead he sort of bowed, feeling ridiculous as he fumbled the door open behind him.

“Y-you too-I mean! Not, you aren't-” a sharp gust of wind shocked him enough to shut him up for a second, his jumbled thoughts slowing down enough for him to try to order them. “Feel better, Felix.” He said, taking a large step back, bowing a bit *again,* and nearly toppling off the top step.

Felix giggled, clutching the door and shivering lightly. “I already do.” He said, eyes sparkling.

*****

Dear diary,

I don't even know where to start. I would start at the beginning but I'm literally dying right now and I don't know how much time I have left.

Lixie…

He kissed me.

Kind of.

He was wearing a mask and it was on the cheek but he was happy and

telling me he fucking MISSED *me which maybe is just something friends say after a weekend apart. But no one has ever said it to me before. Not like that. And* definitely *not with a veiled kiss to the cheek.*

Does he tell his other friends he misses them after less than two days apart? Does he kiss his other friends on the cheek??

Does he consider ME *his* friend?????

God, I hope so.

I think Minho might be my friend. Or close to one maybe. I mean like…I'm pretty sure he doesn't hate *me so that's cool. But Lix? Maybe it's just because I've already named our children but it feels different with him.*

I don't know what's going on at this school, with these people but…

I think I like it…

Chapter End Notes

Both kitten Lixie and Jin Jin have ZERO chill in very different ways and I sort of love that about them ❤ I'll see you on Thursdayyyyy!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Hello, hello my beautiful, gorgeous readers! Thank you so, so much for all of your sweet, kind, hilarious comments ❤ I'm so glad you've been enjoying it so far! I feel like this story is pretty different for me, but then again, I try to make every story I put out there different so...the anxiety of people hating what's next persists. BUT SO DO I!!! Anyway lol, let's go check on poor Jin Jin lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He knew eventually that the novelty of a chilly morning would wear off. But as Hyunjin pulled on his running shoes, eager to get in a run before class, he had to admit that the little plume of breath he saw in the cold was a little exciting. It was *perfect* running weather and if there was anything Hyunjin really needed right now, it was a run to clear his mind.

Normally, when he felt this way, it was different. His racing thoughts were steeped in negativity and anxiety. His thoughts circling back to his loneliness and isolation. But this time? His racing thoughts were pedaling around and around a blond and his friends. He had this jittery sort of excitement bubbling up inside his chest. And while he thought it might be preferable to the sadness he was used to, he had pretty much zero idea how to handle it.

So he zipped up his jacket and set out down the street, hoping the rhythmic pounding of feet on pavement would help his thoughts settle down.

He tried to zero in on his breathing, two seconds in, one long breath out, repeat. And it worked for a little while, perhaps the first half mile. But then a breeze swept over his red ears and he remembered the wind from yesterday. The one that made Felix ask if he was cold. The one that seemed to blow him up the steps of the house and inside. The one that had aimed him directly into what he had decided to consider his first kiss, even if he would never admit it to a single other soul.

But personally, he would like to think that Felix was his first kiss. He knew it would mean that he'd peaked on day one but still. There was

no universe in which he could regret Felix and any level of fake relationship he'd built between them in his head.

He may have been delusional but he was *aware* of it so like…that made it better. Right?

Hyunjin grumbled, shaking his head a little from side to side, trying to clear it. But it was useless because now his thoughts were hyper focused back on Felix's lips covered by a mask and pressed to his cheek. The very intentional, very purposeful way Felix had held onto him and raised up on his tip-toes to kiss his cheek.

Would it happen again? Maybe without a pesky little barrier between them?

The very *thought* had Hyunjin's heart rate spiking even as his pace dipped down.

He focused back on his breathing, two seconds in, one long breath out, repeat.

But only a few repetitions in, he spotted someone running on the other side of the street. While *Hyunjin* might have loved some cold weather running, he knew plenty others didn't agree. That and running alongside the sunrise was *really* not for everyone.

So yeah, it piqued his interest a little when he saw the person lumberjack stomping on the other end of the street. But when he took in the red, out of breath face of the person, his surprise doubled because he *knew* him.

There was Changbin, fighting for his life on a jog of his own.

A little stunned, Hyunjin raised a hand, wondering if he should run over and say hi, or offer to call an ambulance.

But the question was answered for him when Binnie caught sight of Hyunjin and recognition bloomed on his face. His smile was *extra* white against the red of his cheeks and he came barreling across the street, not even looking to see if there was any oncoming traffic.

"Hyunnie! Hey man, good morning!"

"Good morning," Hyunjin said back, eyeing the way Changbin's chest heaved with exertion. "You run?" He asked, eyebrow raised. It was obvious that he spent time in the gym; he was fucking *built.* But he'd

never pictured him as the type to hop on the treadmill or spend much time doing cardio in general.

Changbin's laugh came out a bit wheezy as he shoved his sweaty hair off his forehead. "Not well,"

Hyunjin smiled lightly, not wanting to be rude.

"But that's sort of the point!" Changbin said with hands on his hips, slowly catching his breath. "If I never do the stuff I'm bad at - like running - I'll never get any better! That and like, cardiovascular health or whatever."

Hyunjin chuckled alongside Binnie but gave him an impressed look all the same. "That's…really cool, actually."

The fact that he *chose* to do something he wasn't good at was admirable. And he was right: the only way you got better at anything was through practice.

Maybe that was something he could apply to this whole friendship thing.

So with a deep breath, Hyunjin offered, "If you ever want any pointers…I'm not a *great* runner but I'm not too bad I guess."

"Can you run more than a mile without dialing a 9 and a 1 just in case?"

Hyunjin smiled. "Yes."

"Then you're better than me." Changbin said, smiling back full force. "Alright then coach," He said, slapping Hyunjin on the shoulder jovially. "What do you recommend?"

He didn't know a single thing about Changbin's experience level or his athleticism but he *did* know the number one mistake people often made when it came to running.

"Slow down." He said softly. "Running shouldn't leave you gasping for air. You don't have to be on the verge of fainting for it to 'count'." He put heavy air quotes around his last word.

Changbin nodded carefully, like he was ingesting entirely new information he'd never even considered before. "Okay but like… how?"

“Go slow enough that you could keep a conversation going. It’s an easy way to check that you’re keeping your heart rate low enough.” Hyunjin had done this when he’d first started running too. Naturally, he hadn’t had anyone to run with so he’d just whispered to himself under his breath like a maniac, pausing anytime he ran past another person so he wouldn’t get the cops called on him.

“Sounds easy enough,” Changbin mused before turning his bright smile back on the taller brunette. “Want to run with me? I was on my way to Chan’s.”

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude-”

“Nonsense!” Binnie said immediately, already starting to set off in the same direction he’d been going in, forcing Hyunjin to double back and follow. “Chan will be so happy to see you! Plus, I could use the company!”

Hyunjin fell into step beside Changbin, subtly tapping the breaks and pulling the pace down. He knew it was tempting to run fast, but if Changbin wanted to run more than a mile and survive, he needed to stop running like he was being chased.

“So, how long have you been running?”

Hyunjin shrugged, “Maybe since the beginning of high school?”

“Do you do track or anything?”

Hyunjin couldn’t help the scoff that came out of his mouth. “God, no. Nothing like that.”

Changbin chuckled, the sound only a little strained by his exertion. “Yeah, I didn’t think so.” He admitted. He pointed to the left as they neared an intersection and they turned together, nearly shoulder to bulky shoulder on the sidewalk.

“So what got you into running?”

This was a deceptively difficult question. One that Hyunjin could answer with varying degrees of truthfulness. He could lie and say it was something he and his dad did together. Simple, sweet but could lead to more questions about his family that might expose the lie. He could keep his cards close to his chest and only tell a half lie: it was for stress relief. It was true; he *did* find it to be an effective way to clear his mind. But there was the other side to that truth, the side that

was sad and a little pathetic and kind of embarrassing to admit out loud: it was something you could do alone.

Running didn't require friends or a team. It was just him and the pavement, over and over again, footfall after footfall. He'd depended on himself and only himself for so long now that when the tension or anxiety of a new school or a tough class or a terrifying test made his chest feel tight, he knew he could count on himself to lace up his shoes and run lap after lap around the block. He didn't have to worry about being let down by his lack of social circle.

No matter the town, no matter the neighborhood, it was something constant. And Hyunjin sorely lacked stability in his life.

But he didn't know how to voice all of that in a way that wouldn't end with him getting teary eyed so he shrugged, deciding that if Changbin could do something he wasn't good at with a smile on his face, then he could at least *try*.

"I guess…it helps me calm my thoughts. Almost like…meditation or something." He kept his eyes straight ahead, focusing on the horizon and not the man beside him.

He was terrified that he'd laugh at him or call him sappy or something but all he got back was a delighted little hum and, "I get that. That's sort of how the gym is for me."

"R-really?"

They took a right, weaving their way across the street to the other side.

"Yeah," Binnie said, taking a few moments to catch his breath before continuing. "It's like…I forget everything else except my reps and my sets. Chan says it's like a form of mindfulness."

"I like that." Hyunjin said, nodding his head and thinking that it sounded a lot like why he enjoyed physical activity.

"Do you ever lift or do you just run?" Changbin asked before adding, "We're close to Chan's. He should be waiting out front."

Hyunjin nodded and answered his question. "Pretty much just run. I'd like to try lifting maybe but I have no idea where to start."

"Oh, now *that* I can help with!" Binnie said excitedly.

The taller brunette was about to politely turn him down, citing not wanting to be an imposition when Changbin raised his hand and waved, calling out, “Channie! Look who I found!”

Hyunjin squinted a little and sure enough, three houses down, there was Chan. He was also in workout clothes, stretching out his left calf and ready to join.

“No way! Hyunnie, you run?” Chan said excitedly, easily falling into step beside them. It was a little cramped to run three wide so they staggered a little, creating an effortless little herd as they moved down the sidewalk.

“Yeah, a little,” He said, accepting the fist bump Chan offered and trying not to blush like a little fucking girl.

“He offered to give me some pointers!” Binnie said proudly, his cheeks pink and round as he beamed to them both. “So Channie, it’s our turn next. We need to show Hyunnie around the gym.”

“Oh *hell* yeah,” Chan said eagerly. He’d naturally slowed down to Changbin’s pace even though he seemed to be breathing easy and capable of pushing a bit more speed. “We got your back.”

“*And* arms,” Binnie joked, flexing his bicep. “You know Lix is a little *freak* for arms.”

Hyunjin felt a flush wash from the tips of his ears down to the very bottom of his feet at the mention of his name. “O-oh?”

Chan chuckled and rolled his eyes, reaching out to shove Changbin gently. “Shut up,” He admonished lightly.

And while Hyunjin desperately wanted to know about this whole *Felix was a freak for arms* thing, he was also a little glad he was saved the humiliation when Chan chimed in, changing the subject.

“Speaking of Lix, how was he? Minnie said you took him his homework yesterday?”

Hyunjin nodded, swallowing down his question. “He seemed tired. And bored.” He chuckled a little, thinking about how happy Felix had seemed to have a little company, even if it was only Hyunjin.

Chan and Binnie both chuckled, fond eye rolls implied even as Hyunjin kept his gaze ahead.

“Sounds like Lixie,” Chan said. “He’s never been good at sitting still.”

Binnie chuckled again, his pace dipping just a little and Hyunjin slowing his own step to match. It was all about keeping the breathing slow and steady. And if that meant slowing to a glorified walk then that was okay. It was part of the process.

“Yeah, he uh…said he had body aches and a runny nose.” Hyunjin said, biting his bottom and worrying it between his teeth.

“Fucking Ho-Jin,” Chan muttered under his breath.

Hyunjin snorted. “That’s what I said,” He had questions about Ho-Jin too. Like why was he the actual worst? And would it be possible to erect a barrier around Felix so something like this never happened again?

But those were big questions that he wasn’t quite sure how to ask without sounding like a whiny little kid so instead he took a cleansing breath in and let it out slowly through his lips.

“Whatever. Nothing some ear scratches can’t fix.” He joked.

Or at least, he *meant* it as a joke. But if he used the way Chan tripped over his feet and the odd squeak Binnie made as context clues, perhaps it hadn’t been as lighthearted as he’d intended.

“W-what?” He asked, eyes wide as Chan regained his center of balance and resumed their slow jog. His eyes were completely off his path, solidly stuck on Hyunjin as he blinked too many time, too fast.

“Ear scratches? Like…like his *kitten ears*?”

“Yes?” Hyunjin said, feeling his nerves pull tight. Oh god, had he fucked up? But Felix would have told him, right? He would have told him if the ear scratches were totally out of pocket, right?

“B-but, but Lix *never* let’s *anyone* touch his ears *or* his tail!”

Hyunjin had sort of assumed this, to be fair. Based on how protective he seemed over his tail and the lingering insecurities he harboured about his kitten-ness over all, it made sense.

But to hear it confirmed? From someone who seemingly knew Felix very well for a very long time?

It made a bubbly sort of eager energy fizz up inside his chest. It was

the same kind of fondness that he'd felt after learning Felix had simply seen him and wanted to get to know him.

God, he hoped the blond was feeling well enough to attend class today. He didn't want to go another day without his laughter filling their study hall.

“I…I-I mean…he said he didn't mind.”

“Said he didn't mind?” Chan said, voice a million miles away, sounding contemplative.

Meanwhile, Binnie laughed, the sound coming out a little breathless. “I think Lix has a new favorite, Channie!”

Hyunjin felt his mouth go dry, fear gripping his heart tight. He didn't want to engage in any kind of competition with *anyone,* let alone Chan. A secret part of him really hoped to call him a friend someday.

“I literally have no idea how.” Hyunjin said honestly. Because he didn't. He had no clue why Lix liked him. He wasn't all that interesting or impressive. He was just tall and awkward and quiet.

Chan laughed, interrupting Hyunjin's spiral. “I have a few ideas.” He said cryptically with a smile on his lips.

They took another left and Hyunjin saw his house looming in the distance. Seems their aimless running had led them in a loose circle that Hyunjin was thankful for because he still needed to shower and eat breakfast.

“Uh, this is my house.” He said awkwardly, pointing to it as they grew nearer.

“Oh sick! You're not that far from us!” Binnie said excitedly.

They all stopped running, their jog dying down to a walk.

The taller man nodded shyly and glanced at the front of the house to see his mom clutching her robe tightly around herself and attempting to be stealthy as she peaked through the curtains.

Unfortunately, her robe today was a bright turquoise that probably could have been seen from outer space.

Hyunjin glanced back at Chan and Binnie, desperately hoping they wouldn't notice.

“Um, t-thanks for the run.” He said, offering a shy little wave and starting to stumble towards his front door.

“No, thank *you,”* Binnie crowed, grinning wide. “We'll see you at lunch, right?”

Hyunjin nodded, edging back toward his front door.

Chan smiled and waved, his eyes skating over Hyunjin's shoulder. “Hi Mrs. Hwang!” He called out with a cheerful wave as he and Binnie took off at a light jog again.

Hyunjin spun around to find his mom, eyes wide and gleaming, hanging halfway out the front door. It looked like she'd given up on the ruse after all and had decided to openly gawk instead.

She raised her hand to wave back at Chan a second too late and Hyunjin *swore* she was about to chase them down and ask them to stay for breakfast so he gently gripped her shoulders and steered her back inside.

“Mom, it’s cold.” He said softly, hoping against all hope that she would just act normal and casual and *not* make a big deal out of the fact that she’d just seen her recluse of a son socializing with peers for the first time in eighteen years.

“Hyunnie, who-”

“It’s nothing, mom,” He interrupted, toeing his shoes off and heading for the kitchen and a tall glass of water.

His mom scampered after him like an eager puppy, unfettered. “It’s not *nothing!* You were with-”

“Really, mom, don’t…it’s not a big deal.”

“But Bambi-”

“Mom!” Hyunjin interrupted, his voice coming out a little shrill as he gripped his glass of water, his shaking hand making the water ripple. She went silent, her eyes wide and hopeful as she stared up at him.

“It’s…I don’t even know if it’s like that.”

If they were his friends or just friendly. He didn’t know how to ask and he didn’t know if it was too soon to assume. He just didn’t want to get his hopes up.

His mom's face softened, a look of gentle understanding blooming in her smile. She nodded slowly and took a step back, giving Hyunjin a little room to breathe. He sighed gratefully and took a long sip of water, the coolness easing the lump that had tangled in his throat.

"Can I at least ask what their names are?" She asked lightly, her voice so gentle it didn't even stir the nervousness in Hyunjin again.

He nodded. "Changbin and Chan."

"Changbin and Chan," she repeated, her smile brightening a little at the sound before her eyes drifted back to her sons. "And did you have fun?"

Hyunjin nodded. It had been nice to have company on a run. To have someone to actually test the conversational pace with. To be surrounded by the steady gallop of fellow footfalls.

He'd felt a part of something for once and he had to admit, it had felt nice.

"Good." His mom said with a smile before patting him on the shoulder. "Now go get washed up before class, Jinnie. You smell."

Hyunjin rolled his eyes good naturedly but headed for the stairs.

*****

Even when he parked his bike and shut it off, he could still feel his whole body vibrating. Hyunjin could feel his excitement bubbling up inside himself and as exhilarating as it was, he was a little terrified of just how much he might be crushed if Felix wasn't at school today.

The thought of another study hall spent *actually studying* was depressing.

He pulled the strap of his backpack further up his shoulder and for once, was a little thankful for how his fellow students parted around him, making his trek to his locker quick even as he walked against the flow of the hallway.

Please be there. Please.

He didn't even know what he'd say to him. All he could think about was how Felix had been brave enough to ask Chan to pull some strings so they could meet. How Felix had trusted him, and only him, with touching his ears. How his tail had tried to wrap around Hyunjin, much to the blond's embarrassment.

He remembered that petal pink blush and realized that if Felix could keep putting himself out there like this, then so could Hyunjin. Because a man this sweet deserved to be doted on in return.

He turned the last corner and there, like a shining pink beacon, was a small blond crouched on the floor, riffling through his messy locker.

He wore a baby pink ribbed sweater. It was sleeveless but had a mock neck, making it a truly confusing piece of clothing but adorable nonetheless. He'd paired it with tastefully baggy jeans that had large pink flower patches crawling up his leg. His blond hair was tied up in a messy bun on top of his head, his fluffy ears poking out beside it.

He watched those ears twitch, catching something imperceptible to Hyunjin before the blond's head snapped up, eyes finding him through the crowd.

Hyunjin was the kind of person who was invisible in an empty room. He'd spent his life making himself small. Caving his shoulders in and regretting his height like it was a decision he'd made. He avoided eye contact and small talk, all while hoping that people wouldn't just look at him and label him as something he wasn't.

But then there was Felix. A super nova of a person whose eyes cut through the crowds and looked *only* at Hyunjin. Under his gaze, he was not only seen, but he thought perhaps he was understood. At least a little.

It should have felt vulnerable and terrifying in its newness. But Hyunjin shoved all that down because Felix had wanted to know him before they'd even met. And the thought of Felix being the one to truly know him? It sent shivers down his spine.

So he straightened up, shoulders back and a smile splitting his face open wide.

"Lix!" He cried, unable to hold it in.

He watched as the blond, eyes looking positively *delighted,* popped up from his crouch, smile bigger than ever. "Jin Jin! Hi! Good morning!"

He was bouncing on his toes, clutching a text book to his chest as Hyunjin approached.

“Good morning,” Hyunjin replied, grinning like a fool before laughing a little at himself and scratching the back of his neck nervously. “You feeling better?”

The blond shrugged and leaned against the locker next to theirs so Hyunjin could open his. “Better than yesterday, that’s for sure.”

“Those ear scratches helped?” Hyunjin joked, his heart beating a million miles an hour in his chest as he spun the combination lock.

Felix blushed and bit his lower lip but nodded shyly all the same. “Like magic,”

Hyunjin chuckled and finally yanked his locker open. The little picture of Felix still clung to the inside of the door with the neon flower magnet.

“*Jinnie,*” Felix whined, peering inside. “You still haven’t decorated!”

Hyunjin unloaded his heaviest textbooks into his locker, determined not to break his spine before he graduated.

“Yes I have. There’s a picture of you.”

Felix rolled his eyes. “That’s not *nearly* enough.”

Hyunjin disagreed. A picture of Felix was already more than he ever could have asked for. Would it be weird to tell him that works of art such as himself deserved to have an entire gallery wall to themselves? Or, in this case, locker door.

“I just don’t know what else to put in here.” He said instead, figuring it was a much more normal response.

“Hmmm,” Felix hummed, tapping his chin carefully. “Well, what else do you like?”

“I dunno,” Hyunjin said shyly. Of course he knew some things that he liked. He liked flowers but he also liked the thick soles of his riding boots. He liked vintage cameras and candle making but he also liked the feel of grease under his fingers as he worked on his bike and the smell of his leather jacket. He liked slow mornings and the smell of coffee on a cold day. He liked thick wool socks and endless time to

read. He liked the way his fingers wrapped around a paintbrush like they'd finally found home. He liked the way the light filtered through the trees, dappling the pavement with summer sun. How did you describe that to someone? How did you explain how all these contradictions lived inside of a person?

But Felix didn't roll his eyes or call bullshit, even though he probably had the right to. Instead, he tightened his bun with a steady look in his eyes and said, "That's okay. I'll help you figure it out."

"Yeah?" He asked, shutting his locker and turning his body to face Felix a little better.

The blond nodded with confidence before smiling playfully. "Just consider me your personal locker decorator! I'm going to design the best, most beautiful locker *ever,* just you wait!"

"I have no doubt," Hyunjin said with a smile. He envisioned it being pink and *dripping* with rhinestones. He imagined silly postcards of cats and maybe even a little disco ball. But hey, if Felix was the one putting it together, he was sure he'd love it. Even if it was *miles* from his own style.

The blond grinned, ears flinching when the 5 minute warning bell shrieked overhead.

"I should get going," Hyunjin admitted, not wanting to be late to class.

The blond nodded and took a step back, hoisting his comically large backpack onto his shoulders. Hyunjin wondered if he even had *room* in his locker for silly things like books. Maybe he could offer to carry some books for him sometime? Walk him to class?

"Me too," Felix said, taking a small step back. "I'll see you in calc?"

Hyunjin nodded, thinking that maybe some other day he'd pluck up the courage to ask to escort him to class. But he still called out, "Hey Lix?"

The blond turned, head cocked to the side in curiosity.

"I-I'm glad you're back." Hyunjin admitted, forcing the next sentence out. "Study hall sort of sucks without you."

His heart was pounding like he'd just uttered a love confession.

But he felt less pathetic when Felix blinked in confusion before beaming back at Hyunjin, his tail whipping from side to side enthusiastically and his fists clenched tight around his backpack straps. “Oh, I bet!” Felix said with a giggle. “Don’t worry, I’ll be there to bother you today!”

“Looking forward to it,” Hyunjin said, feeling like fucking 007 with how smooth he was being right now.

Determined not to ruin it, he offered a little wave and strode off toward his class. He fought the urge to glance over his shoulder at the blond but he had a sneaking suspicion that brown eyes were watching his back.

He floated through his first two classes, feeling more settled just knowing that Felix was feeling better and in the same building as him.

Between second and third hour, he needed to stop at his locker to exchange books. But when he opened it, a small piece of lime green paper came fluttering out. He caught it, brow furrowed as he unfolded it to find it shaped like a lily pad and filled with a loopy script.

Cool tones or warm tones?

Xoxo, Lixie

Hyunjin's eyes got stuck on the x’s and o’s before deciding he probably signed every letter like that. It was cute and Felix loved cute things. Easy, simple, done.

He dug a pen out of his bag with a fluttering heart. He paused, paper pressed against the cool metal of the locker and blue ballpoint hovering a hair above it.

It should be a simple question. Even easier than answering his favorite color when you had to narrow it down to a single one. But it changed on the day. He likes moody autumnal palettes when hot cider started to sound good and the mornings were too crisp to be comfortable. But he liked the soothing, dulcet tones of winter when snow nipped the air and the jittery excitement of winter break took over. Spring was bright, lively colors that made him feel like he was thawing with

garish pinks and delicate, fresh greens. And then summer, oh summer. His sanctuary. No class, no early mornings, just endless evenings with pink sunsets and the golden light his lamp washed over his late night sketches of fireflies and sunbaked flowers.

How did he sum that up? Felix wanted to know him but what if he was too much? Too confusing? What if his soft insides disappointed him?

He chewed his bottom lip thoroughly, glad he'd opted for the eyebrow piercing instead of the lip one.

The five minute bell rang and he stood, frozen. Debating.

The one minute bell rang and it was now or never. He had to write *something.* He didn't want Felix to think he was ignoring him.

With a groan and a feral hope that this would be enough, he put pen to paper.

Both? Depends on the season, I guess.

Hyunjin

He folded it again and hurriedly shoved it back through the vents on Felix's locker before he could talk himself out of it. It wasn't a great answer but it was better than nothing.

He raced to his next class, making it in the nick of time and then proceeded to spend the entirety of his third hour obsessing over if his handwriting was attractive enough or not.

Because Felix's was cute and pretty and bubbly, just like him. But Hyunjin's was small and neat and probably made him look like an absolute loser somehow.

When the bell rang, he was convinced that he'd enter their calculus class to an unimpressed glare. But when he got to class, he found the blond hunched over his phone and scrolling *intently.* He was a man on a mission.

Not wanting to interrupt, Hyunjin snuck over to his desk, sitting down quietly and pulling the dreaded textbook from his bag.

“Jin!”

He jumped a little, head flying up to find the blond suddenly standing by his desk, bouncing on his toes with excitement with hands clasped eagerly in front of his chest.

Hyunjin's eyes caught the shocked look of a few classmates over the blond's shoulders but couldn't pay attention to that when Felix was *right there.*

“Okay so it depends on the season? Then what's your favorite season?”

It took Hyunjin a second to get it as Felix started mid conversation but it clicked after a beat and he shrugged. “I mean…I like summer? But I don't think it's my favorite. I…I like them all for different reasons?” It came out as a question, like he wanted permission to give his terrible non-answer. “Sorry, I know it's not very helpful.” He muttered.

But Felix had a look of contemplation in his face, like he was mentally paging through ideas. “No, no, it's okay! If anything, it just gives me more room to play with the pallette!”

He smiled brightly down at Hyunjin, edging closer to his desk as someone squeezed passed him in the narrow aisle.

He opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by the teacher walking in, clapping their hands and asking everyone to take a seat.

Felix pouted for a second before giving Hyunjin a ridiculously adorable little finger wiggling wave and skipping back to his own desk across the room.

Hyunjin spent the entire class lamenting the loss of whatever Felix hadn't been able to say. However, his grief was premature because when the bell rang, the blond was up and out of his seat in a flash, questions tumbling out like he's been holding them in all class.

“Okay but so how can you like winter? It's all cold and dreary and sure, snow is pretty but then it melts and gets all gross and ugly! And it gets dark so *early* and then it just makes me sleepy and then I get *annoyed* that I'm so sleepy all the time.” He rolled his eyes like he was *so over it* and Hyunjin couldn't help but giggle.

“It's not all bad,” he justified, shouldering his backpack and leading the blond out of the room and into the not so gentle crush of the lunch rush. “There's hot chocolate. And cozy sweaters. Christmas lights and fluffy blankets and…yeah.” He shrugged, noticing he was veering off into loser territory. He so badly wanted Felix to know him. If the blond wanted to, he wanted to show him the *real* Hyunjin. But it was scary. He's had years of learning to store that side of himself carefully away from the eyes and taunts of his peers.

To try to undo all that conditioning was hard. It was vulnerable and terrifying.

But as Felix so often did, he merely quirked his lips to the side and *shattered* Hyunjin's fears with his reply. “And cute hats.” He reasoned soundly before nodding a little to himself and smiling up at Hyunjin.

“Y-yeah. And cute hats.” Hyunjin said with a tentative smile back. “See? It's not all bad.”

The crowd carried them to the door of the cafeteria and into line.

“Okay well then what's so good about summer?” Felix asked, sticking close to Hyunjin to be heard over the ruckus around them. Hyunjin swore he felt the brush of a tail against the back of his leg but perhaps he was just casually hallucinating.

“You’re kidding, right?” Hyunjin said in disbelief.

“I dunno, can't really wear cute hats in the summer,” Felix teased.

But Hyunjin couldn't help it. He had to defend that magical safe season that took him away from all the expectations of socialization. The season that let him swim in his thoughts, drowning in his creativity and choosing not to come up for air.

“Summer is, i-is, it's *magic!* You can sleep in as late as you want and stay up late. There’s star gazing and bonfires and just…the world is so *open,* so *active* in the summer. Sure, bugs are kind of gross but you can’t tell me that the sound of cicadas in the evening isn’t one of the most soothing things. And I know you wouldn’t like swimming but even if you don’t get in the breeze? Off the ocean or a lake? The feel of hot sand between your toes and just laying out and *baking* in the sun? Now *that’s* heaven an-what? Why are you looking at me like that?”

He quickly checked his face, wondering if he’d missed a spot when

shaving. But he found only smooth skin under his fingers.

Felix was smiling softly at him, his eyes lit from within. “Nothing.” He said with a cute little shrug of his shoulders. “I just like hearing you talk.” He said with a little giggle.

Hyunjin openly gaped at him as the blond paid for his food. He was pretty sure he paid too but he was too focused on following after the blond like a lost puppy, thoughts racing in his head.

“Why?” He asked, truly perplexed. He’d just spend a solid minute talking without thought. He’d just let his mouth run without permission and spouted a bunch of nonsense.

“The same reason you liked hearing me ramble on about my keychains.” Felix said, their table growing closer. “Because it’s an interesting way to get to know someone.”

Hyunjin blinked, a little struck by the comparison but he found he couldn’t quite refute it. After all, he’d been nothing but truthful when he’d said that. So why wouldn’t Felix?

“Like I said, Jin Jin. I wanna know everything about you.” He said it shyly as he moved to the side to knock their shoulders together. Even though Felix’s shoulder hit him mid bicep, the shy little gesture, with pink blush and lower lip bitten was like a shot of confidence to Hyunjin. Whenever Felix showed that he too could be soft and vulnerable, it made Hyunjin feel like he could be brave. If Felix was willing to try, then Hyunjin would meet him in the middle.

“You can ask me anything.” He said fearlessly, feeling a little thrill shoot down his spine as he returned the shoulder bump.

It earned him a little giddy giggle as they reached the table.

“Binnie, move! I wanna sit next to Jin Jin!” He said, hand on his hip as he impatiently tapped his toe.

The bulky man rolled his eyes. “What if *I* wanted to sit next to Hyunnie?” He said defiantly, throwing an arm over Hyunjin’s shoulders.

Felix’s eyes narrowed, his ears flattening ever so slightly. “Jin Jin and I have important locker design ideas to discuss.”

“Oh? Important?”

“Come on Binnie, sit next to me,” Chan said with a fond sigh of exasperation and not so subtle wink at Hyunjin. “You already saw Hyunnie this morning. Let Lix have a turn.”

Changbin groaned but moved while Felix shooed him off before rounding on Hyunjin. “You saw Binnie this morning?”

He nodded as they sat. “I ran into Binnie and Chan on my run this morning.”

“You run?” Felix asked, sounding interested.

He nodded again. “Yeah. It’s good for clearing my head. What about you?”

The shorter man scrunched up his nose in distaste. “Only when I mess up at cheer practice and coach makes me run laps.”

Hyunjin smiled lopsidedly, letting a little laugh out.

Felix’s tail looped primly around the blond’s waist, making sure to stay clear of the potentially dirty tile floors. The tip waved calmly in his lap and Hyunjin had to wonder if a slow, leisurely tail meant he was relaxed. If it meant he was happy or content.

They quieted down long enough for Hyunjin to get halfway through his slice of pizza and for Felix to build a small log cabin out of his baby carrots before the blond was pulling his phone back out and sliding his chair closer to Hyunjin.

He swore his heart fucking *stopped* when his little shoulder nudged against his own and stayed. The blond hunched close and eagerly opened up his Pinterest app, completely oblivious to the cardiac arrest Hyunjin was currently experiencing.

“Okay, so this is what I have so far! For design ideas! It’s not much but in my defense, I only started on it like an hour ago.”

So *that’s* what he’d been furiously scrolling about on his phone before calculus started. He’d been pinning like he fucking life depended on it and Hyunjin, being an absolute loser who loved a good vision board, coudln’t help but feel his stuttering heart fall back into a sustainable rhythm, only a little deeper, a little stronger. A little more besotted by the man next to him.

He carefully leaned against Felix’s shoulder and took a look as a tiny

finger scrolled through a truly *wild* board. It had no rhyme or reason. It was utter chaos that encapsulated every color known to man and dabbled in every theme imaginable. There was precisely zero focus on the entire board but it didn't matter because Felix had been making it for *him.* He was invested in something for Hyunjin and god, that alone was enough to make his heart fucking flutter.

"You are aware that an armchair won't fit in my locker, right Lix?" He teased, pointing to a photo of a beautiful, antiqued green velvet armchair.

Felix shoved him with his shoulder and rolled his eyes. "Yes, I am indeed aware of that but it's about the *vibes,* Jin."

"Aw yes. The vibes."

"Don't get cute with me."

Hyunjin felt himself blushing but he couldn't stop. "I'm not."

"Yes you are," Felix said with finality before his eyes flicked back over Hyunjin's face and he grinned a little evilly. "In your defense, I guess you're *always* cute."

Best. Day. Ever.

Today would go down in history as both the best and *last* day of Hyunjin's life because he felt that pesky heart attack from earlier slam back down on him. He wheezed out some sort of dazed thank you that had Felix laughing with victory before diving back into his board. He stuck close, slowly dismantling his cabin creation to pop a carrot into his mouth and crunch happily behind his hand.

He scrolled fast, nodding happily whenever Hyunjin would say he liked something or pointed out a particularly eyecatching photo.

"That's very…*bright,*" He said about a particular pin of a hot pink convertible that simply *oozed* Malibu Barbie energy.

Felix's big brown eyes flicked up to Hyunjin, calculating but open. "Okay so you like the darker, moodier colors." He stated it like it was a valuable piece of information he was filing away for important use later.

Hyunjin nodded before taking in Felix's pink, playful outfit and adding. "I mean, it's not that I *don't* like bright colors."

“Sure, but it’s not your *personal* style.” Felix said effortlessly.

“Yeah. Exactly.” It was a little thing but it felt so goddamn good to be seen.

By the time the bell rang, Hyunjin realized he’d spent the whole lunch break folded over a phone with Felix, ignoring the rest of the table. He felt a little bad, not wanting to come off as rude.

But no one seemed upset besides Felix, who was pouting that they had to stop.

“I think you might have a Pinterest problem.” Hyunjin joked, tossing his dirty tray on the stack of other dirty trays for washing.

“It’s not a *problem,*” Felix whined. “It’s a *skill*.”

Hyunjin laughed, dreading the idea that they would have to go their separate ways until study hall.

The taller man hummed, nearing the door to the cafeteria and the inevitable parting of ways.

“I’ll see you in study hall?” Felix asked, as if Hyunjin had ever skipped a class a day in his life.

“Yup, I’ll be there.” He confirmed regardless.

Felix nodded, happy with the answer before offering one of those pretty little waves that Hyunjin was quickly becoming addicted to and floating down the hallway, away from Hyunjin.

And while yes, he did have to wait until study hall to physically *see* Felix again, he was rewarded by another little loopy lettered note when he stopped by his locker after fifth period.

Savory or sweet?

Xoxo, Lixie

Hyunjin bit his lip, holding in his ridiculous smile as he scrawled

“Savory” as his answer and slipped the note back into the blond’s locker.

And again, after sixth hour, another note. This one asking him if he preferred chocolate or vanilla.

They were seemingly random little questions but they still pulled a smile onto Hyunjin's face. It felt like a low pressure way to start letting Felix in. As if the blond was trying to make the whole idea of opening up a bit more bearable for Hyunjin.

He dropped the note back into Felix's locker with an answer of vanilla before nearly skipping to study hall.

He entered to find Felix already hunched over his phone and pinning like a mad man. He couldn't help but giggle as fearlessly took the seat next to him.

“Hey Lixie,” he said, his voice coming out a little too excited. But it didn't matter when the blond grinned maniacally back at him and immediately dragged his chair closer to sit nearly shoulder to shoulder again, like how they had done at lunch. If they only ever say this close, Hyunjin would be more than fine with that. Distance was for losers anyways and while he might be a loser, Lix definitely wasn't.

“Jin-ah! What took you so long?”

Hyunjin glanced at the time. “Lix, I'm 5 minutes early.”

“But we only have an hour!” Felix whined, cramming himself into Hyunjin's side and getting down to business.

He'd easily pinned another hundred things that he wanted Hyunjin's opinions and thoughts on and wow, Hyunjin has never talked so much in his life. And not that any of it was particularly ground breaking but it was so foreign to have someone asking him about himself and listening like they wanted to complete a puzzle.

He told Felix about star gazing when he was little at his grandfather's land outside the city. He told him about rebuilding the motorcycle with his dad and confessed that he didn't really know much else about machinery outside his own bike. He talked about moving time and time again, the boxes that never got thrown away or unpacked. He told him about the creepy ceramic cat his mom put by the guest book that he was about halfway sure was haunted. He told him about the fourth house and how he swore he'd seen a ghost in it and the fifth

house where he'd fallen off his bike and the seventh house where he'd asked his mom if it was okay that he might like boys.

He felt the tip of a fluffy tail snake its way around his ankle and the warmth travelled all the up to his face.

“Did your parents…were they cool about it?” Felix asked, eyes preemptively so worried for Hyunjin that he couldn't help but reach out and give his ears a reassuring pat.

“They were wonderful. Didn't even bat an eye.” He smiled as the blond's shoulders relaxed visibly. “My mom just wanted to know if I had a crush on someone.”

Felix giggled, his head tilting as if it wanted to chase Hyunjin's retreating hand. “And? Did you?”

Hyunjin rolled his eyes and shook his head. “No one in real life. Just movies and stuff.”

The blond smiled like that made him happy for some reason before focusing his attention back on his phone screen, messing with his Pinterest board.

“I don't see how any of my useless rambling is helping your design process.” Hyunjin said it as a joke but Felix frowned up at him, seemingly offended.

“Hey! It's not *useless*.”

“Lix, I spend five minutes trying to describe to you in detail the pattern of the wallpaper in the dining room of-”

“-of house three, yes. And I will cherish this information for all of my days.”

Hyunjin felt himself flush with the flattery but he couldn't help the way his brown scrunched. “But…why?”

“Because…” the blond trailed off as he thought through his words. “Because I like learning about you. Even this little stuff. It all made you who you are, even the silly stuff. And I like who you are.”

“Y-you do?”

Felix’s answering smile was so sugar spun sweet. “Of course I do, Jin Jin.”

To him, it really was that simple. It was easy to tell a stranger they'd become a friend and it was easy to hear little anecdotes and decide it was enough to base an opinion on.

“Oh, come on, Jin, don't act so surprised!” Felix said, his smile turning a bit pleaded like it was important to him that Hyunjin knew he was… what? Special? Worthy? Interesting?

“I meant it when I said I wanna learn everything about you.” Felix said with certainty, nudging his already nestled shoulder further into Hyunjin's side. “So what was the best vacation you ever took as a kid?”

So Hyunjin told him about a disastrous camping trip he'd loved because he's had his dad to himself for a full 5 days and the blond laughed and pinned new ideas like mad and Hyunjin was left wondering if this was how friendships happened. Sharing pointless stories over unfinished homework until the bell rang.

Chapter End Notes

> Ooo, Jinnie has some running buddies now! And I have to say, the next chapter is probably one of my favorites See you on Sunday!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> OMG HIIIIIIIIII!!!! ❤❤❤ I hope you've all been doing well! I want to give another huge thank you to everyone for reading, commenting, leaving kudos and just genuinely being the sweetest readers I could ever hope for ❤ I think this might be one of my favorite chapters so I won't keep you any longer! LET'S GO!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hyunjin groaned, wrench falling to the floor and a grimy hand getting wiped across his brow. He grimaced but he couldn't deny that he'd really grown to love the smell of oil and grease over the years. Which was something he never thought he'd say but here he was, elbow deep in his motorcycle's engine, trying to locate the source of the odd ticking noise it had been making.

It started Friday morning, on the ride into school. This little, barely noticeable *tick, tick tick*. Rhythmic in a foreboding sort of way. And while she still ran like a dream, Hyunjin's anxiety had skyrocketed. He'd parked and inspected both tires, thinking perhaps he'd picked up a nail and was hearing it hit the pavement with each revolution. But he saw nothing and no quick cursory glance could reveal the source.

He must have worn his worry on his face because the second he turned the corner and Felix found him, his bright Friday smile dimmed a little.

"What's wrong, Jin Jin?"

"Bike is making a weird noise," He said, yanking his locker to find yet another note.

Felix blushed and ducked his head. "I thought I'd be gone by the time you showed up," He muttered.

Hyunjin read the letter and smiled softly, the sweetness of it dulling the edge to his anxiety. "Late night *and* early morning," He answered.

Felix pouted. "But I asked late night *or* early morning! You can't pick both."

"But I just did."

Felix's eyes narrowed, his hip propped against the bank of lockers and *exuding* sass. "Are you one of those weirdos who never sleeps?"

Hyunjin laughed. "You mean a vampire? No, I just like both for different reasons."

The blond sighed longingly, his eyes getting this dreamy, faraway look. "Good. Because sleep is the best."

Hyunjin took one look at Felix's face and had to smile. "Of *course* the kitten hybrid likes his naps," He joked.

Felix gasped, faux shock painted on his face as he gave Hyunjin a weak slap to the arm even as giggles tumbled out. "I'm built to sleep at *least* 12 hours a day! It's not my fault that society isn't designed for me." He pouted, giving Hyunjin his finest puppy dog eyes.

It was a new weapon he'd unveiled recently that was *incredibly* effective against Hyunjin and also pointless. Felix could ask him for anything with a straight face and he'd still say yes. But he liked the way he'd tip his head back, bottom lip getting all pillowy and pitiful and the way his eyes would get impossibly wide and melty and god, he was the most precious thing on the face of the planet.

"Poor thing," Hyunjin choked out casually, reaching out to give his ears a brief little pat that had Felix's grinning happily.

The bell rang and Felix sank back down, Hyunjin only just realizing he'd been on his tiptoes, chasing the ear scratches. "I'll see you later?"

He always asked it, as if Hyunjin would one day just shrug and say no.

"Yay. Calculus." He joked weakly, earning him a giggle from the blond and one of his little waves before he'd skipped down the hall.

Hyunjin had spent the rest of the day responding to locker notes or giggling at Jisung's *obvious* lunch time flirting with Minho that by the time he left school after the final bell, he'd nearly forgotten the whole mysterious ticking noise.

That was until he started her up and the usual reassuring purr was interrupted by a gentle, nearly not there ticking.

So here he was, on a Saturday afternoon, alternating between trying

to google a sound and tentatively tinkering with things, terrified he'd somehow just make it all worse.

While it could be frustrating, he had to admit, he sort of loved it too. He didn't love that his bike needed work but he liked the problem solving side to it. He liked the process of slowly unravelling how it all worked, what had gone wrong and how he could fix it.

It didn't hurt that the vibes were *immaculate* either. The day had dawned mild and rainy, a blanket of fog laying over everything. While the rain was consistent, it was gentle. The pitter patter of it on the roof was almost meditative as he methodically worked his way through the issue as best he could.

His dad had offered to help but Hyunjin had politely turned him down, determined to find the issue on his own, even if it took all day. And, if he was being honest, that was part of the draw. Because when Felix had raced off after study hall to cheer practice, Hyunjin had been struck by the fact that there was no fundraiser this weekend. No convenient excuse to see him. Just two days of emptiness that seemed to drag on forever if he stared too intently at them.

So having a little project? One that consisted of problems with concrete answers? It was truly a blessing in disguise.

By the second hour, the garage had started to become stuffy so he'd raised the door, letting the dreary gray air of a rainy fall day infiltrate the space. It was calming, as the old radio his dad had owned since college crooned out some old FM radio that was half static and all vibes.

He wiped his hands uselessly on the filthy rag hanging from his backpocket before picking up his phone and googling *what if the ticking sounds like it's coming from behind the headlight?*

He was halfway through a YouTube video of some bored dad explaining something about sparkplugs when he heard the watery sound of footsteps in a puddle.

Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of Felix standing outside his garage, umbrella gripped in one hand and a tupperware in the other against his chest.

Suddenly it made sense why today was so dreary and dull; the sun had been soaked up into this man, given arms and legs and drifted right out from behind the clouds, leaving the sky gray and sad in its wake.

But here he stood, clad in a yellow and white gingham dress, an oversized lime green cardigan with daisies over top. And as if that wasn't already adorable enough, he wore shiny white rain boots that his slim legs swam in and a bucket hat that had a fucking frog face on it, twin braids spilling out on each side.

Maybe he wasn't just sunshine. Perhaps he was *joy* incarnate. He was every dream you'd ever had as a child, manifested. He was silly and playful and completely comfortable in this.

He was everything Hyunjin wanted to be and everything he *wanted.*

"Hi Jin Jin!" Felix chirped, looking delighted to have found him so easily. His tail was wrapped tightly around his waist, terrified of the rain that dripped just outside the halo of his umbrella.

"Lixie?" He said, blinking slowly and a little scared that the vision before him would evaporate as the hopeful hallucination it *had* to be.

But he didn't. When Hyunjin opened his eyes again, he found the blond still standing with nervous shuffling feet just outside his garage.

"Lix!" He called, taking a step forward and waving him in. He was suddenly horrifically aware of how utterly filthy he was. He tried in vain to hide his grease caked cuticles behind his back but knew his face was smudged to hell. He blushed underneath it and ducked his head. "I uh…what are you doing here?"

Felix stepped into the garage and set his umbrella on the ground to dry. His tail tentatively unfurled from around his waist, as if ready to curl right back up if needed.

"Oh! Right! I wanted to bring you something as a thank you for bringing me my homework when I was sick earlier this week. I got your address from Binnie. I hope that's okay?"

"Totally okay," Hyunjin assured immediately. Felix could have his social security number if he wanted it. "But you really didn't have to."

"I wanted to," Felix said happily, holding out the tupperware with a little smile.

And Hyunjin was going to say something about how he shouldn't have, something polite like that but when he glanced at Felix's offering and saw what appeared to be the same brownies with sprinkles he'd devoured in less than 48 hours after buying from the

bakesale, his eyes went wide. “Wait…are those…those were *your* brownies?”

If this man could bake? On top of looking like a fallen angel and having a heart of gold, he was going to go get baptized because god was real. There was no way a man like this just *happened.* He was crafted by some kind of all knowing, all seeing entity that had decided to dabble in perfection just once.

Felix bit his bottom lip, his toe scuffing carefully against the dusty floor but it was answer enough.

“Lix! How come you didn’t tell me?” He asked, searching for a cleaner towel than the one he’d been using and coming up empty. It was a garage after all; they didn’t really keep their finest linens out here.

“Well what if you hadn't liked them?”

Hyunjin rolled his eyes, because he just couldn't imagine a world in which he *didn't* like a single thing Felix did. “Don't be ridiculous,” he scoffed.

Felix's eyes flicked up, a light joy pushing his eyes into little crescents. “So it's a good surprise then?”

“It's a *great* surprise. Unfortunately for you, I will be requesting these constantly now though.”

Felix laughed gleefully. “Binnie and Jisung too. Don't worry, I'm sure I can pencil you into the rotation.”

Hyunjin breathed a sigh of only partially feigned relief.

Silence took over as Hyunjin fiddled with a random wrench, hands still slick with grease as the rain fell steadily outside.

He wanted to ask Felix to stay. He didn't want to watch him walk away into the fog, swallowed up until Monday. He wanted to pretend that a visit from a friend over the weekend was normal for him. That he did this kind of thing all the time.

But he didn't and the tight knot of unease in his stomach reminded him just how out of his depth he was.

“How's the bike?” Felix asked, drifting a little closer with a worried look on his face, like he was observing a wounded animal.

“Still making that noise.” he muttered dejectedly. He knew he'd figure it out eventually, he always did. But it was still frustrating to feel like he was running in circles, hitting dead ends every time.

Felix pouted and patted the seat. “Poor bike.” He said in such a sad voice that it made Hyunjin want to apologize for not having it fixed sooner.

“It'll be okay,” he soothed, both to himself and the blond. “All I have to do is find the problem and fix it.”

“Sounds difficult,” Felix said with worry tinged eyes.

But Hyunjin merely shrugged, bobbing his head side to side. “I mean, it can be yeah. But it's also like a puzzle so it's kind of fun too.”

He watched Felix's ears perk up, his interest evident. “So you've done this before?”

Was he hallucinating or did Felix sound almost borderline impressed with him right now?

He nodded shyly. “Yeah. Once or twice.”

“Wow,” Felix said, his tone very approving. “That's really cool.”

Had Hyunjin ever been called cool by someone who *wasn't* his mom? Probably not.

“Would you maybe…want some company?” Felix asked, looking down to his pristine rain boots, shiny and stark white, like he was nervous Hyunjin would say no.

He had to try a couple different times before he was able to stutter out, “I uh, I y-yes. I would love some company. I mean…i-if you're not busy?”

The blond beamed at him, his own shoulders sagging like he'd been nervous. Had he really thought Hyunjin would say no? Did he really think that Hyunjin would shoo him off like a stray dog?

He took another little step forward, still floating in the broad expanse of an empty garage. “I've got all day.”

They were his new favorite words. They oozed of lazy rain soaked conversations and a slow ticking of the clock. They felt like endless possibilities that were steeped in warmth and comfort. It felt like a

never ending dream that he didn't have to wake up from.

It promised a moment he could sit in, with someone by his side. He swore, the whole room felt warmer after that. Like sunlight had someone suffused through the air, bringing with it something golden and ineffable.

He blinked once, his trance broken when he watched Felix shuffle in his spot again.

“Oh! Here, let me get you a stool!” He said, suddenly realizing he was a host now and yeah, sure, maybe he was covered in dust and grime but he could at least be polite.

He heard a bell-like giggle behind him as he rushed over to the work bench and grabbed the old metal stool that had always lived in every garage they'd ever had. It was one of those things that had followed them from town to town. Hyunjin had sat on it as a kid, feet dangling a mile off the floor as he watched his dad fix the chain on his bicycle. He'd sat on it as a young teenager, listening to his dad explain how to carefully and safely clean the blades on the lawnmower, his toes now grazing the ground if he flexed his feet down. And today, he'd sat on it, 18 and googling how to fix his beloved bike with his feet flat on the ground, knees bent.

It sent a little shock down his spine to watch Felix climb up onto that same stool gratefully. His feet hovered several inches off the ground, swinging playfully back and forth while he clutched the Tupperware of brownies securely in his lap. He looked way too happy for someone who was sitting in a drafty garage, ready to watch someone try and fail to fix his motorcycle for the next few hours.

But there he was, smiling at Hyunjin with all his teeth and looking so incredibly excited to be there.

“So, how do you even start?” Felix asked, leaning forward like he was indeed very interested to hear about Hyunjin's investigative process.

Hyunjin crouched back down by his bike, frowning at it and nodding from side to side. “Sort of depends. Sometimes I can poke around and see what's wrong. But since it's a *sound* this time, I sort of just started googling stuff.”

“Any leads so far?”

He sighed. “Not yet. I checked my oil levels and they were fine. I also

checked for an exhaust leak at the header because I read that it can be pretty common when it starts to get colder but no luck."

The blond rubbed his chin thoughtfully, as if running through his extensive knowledge of motorcycles, in search of the answer.

"It's okay though," Hyunjin said, scrolling through his other suspected reasons in his phone. "I have a few other ideas I can check for, so it's just about going through the list now."

"Do you need a cheer?" Felix asked, voice incredibly serious for such a silly question.

Hyunjin laughed and shook his head. "Not yet, but I'll let you know."

"Okay good because I've got like, a million of them."

"Oh?"

"M-hm," the blond's tail made a very self assured swish, almost like the equivalent of a hair flip before lazily wrapping back around him. It was cute how close it stayed to him at all times but it made Hyunjin wonder what his tail did when he was somewhere familiar or safe, like his home.

But Hyunjin focused back in, determined to fix his bike before the weekend was done. If he didn't, he'd be walking to school come Monday. Which wouldn't be terrible but still, he'd rather not have to lug that damn backpack all the way there on foot. That would probably classify as cruel and unusual punishment.

"So," he said, clearing his throat and carefully checking the exhaust system for a leak. He'd cleared the header but he supposed a check of the whole thing couldn't hurt. "What do you normally do on the weekends?"

Felix seemed like the kind of guy to have plans with friends all the time. Going to the movies, shopping, sleepovers, the whole 9 yards. But given his talent for baking, perhaps he also enjoyed a nice evening in every now and again.

"Well, sometimes I have games to cheer at, so that's fun! But if I don't, then I like to see my friends. Or bake. Or, lately? I've been really into jigsaw puzzles which I know sounds really lame but I'm working on a HUGE one right now and when I'm done, I'm going to glue it together and frame it!"

He sounded so excited it made Hyunjin smile. “That doesn't sound lame. It sounds fun.”

And Felix beamed at him, chattering on and on about how he'd like to make a gallery wall of framed puzzles someday when he had his own place. He talked about the fictional kitchen he'd have, filled with all the baking supplies he'd ever need and how he'd learn to bake the perfect cheesecake for Jisung and how he'd maybe even write his own cookbook someday if he could. And then he talked about how he'd decorate an entire apartment like how he'd decorated his locker and Hyunjin just knew that the place would be an absolute romantic mess, filled to the ceiling with bits and bobs that meant the world to him, even if they were broken or useless. As long as they were pretty and had a special memory attached, he'd treat it like treasure.

And this wild little part of Hyunjin's brain wondered if he was included in the group of friends that Felix said he'd throw weekly family dinners for. He wondered if he'd be enlisted to help on move in day, asked to paint the living room a bright pink and rewarded with pizza on the floor for his efforts.

It all sounded like a dream. It was romantic, the way Felix talked about owning a little apartment, all to himself. And if there was one thing Hyunjin loved, it was romance in any form. Including the kind that came from small, crummy apartments that felt like freedom. Cracked linoleum and overworked ceiling fans and noisy neighbors that were *yours*.

He dreamed of things like this too.

He wanted to tell Felix that he wanted the same things. He wanted to ask if maybe they could share their dreams together but that was insane and required about a thousand times more bravery than he had.

So he listened to the sultry rumble of Felix's excited voice, weaving dreams and plans together, eyes carefully inspecting every last inch of his bike until he finally landed on the likely culprit: his drive chain.

He made a little noise of excitement. His legs were sore and his back *screaming* from having been hunched over all day. If this really was the problem, he might still be able to recover from this before the aggressive curve in his spine became permanent.

The blond stopped mid sentence, eyes widening dramatically as he leaned forward, his boots squeaking against the metal rung of the

stool where they perched. “Did you find it?”

“I *think*?” Hyunjin said tentatively. He didn't want to jinx it.

Felix sprung to his feet excitedly, nearly dumping the brownies on the floor before barely saving them and setting them in the seat he'd just vacated.

“Go Hyunnie, that's my man! If he can't fix it, no one can! Gooooo, Hyunjin!” He waved invisible pom poms with a show stopping smile.

It was cute and silly and something Hyunjin wanted to laugh at and maybe give a silly bow for just to make the blond laugh but literally, how was he even supposed to *breath* when Felix had just called him *his man?*

He would do *anything* to earn that title. Sure, Felix was just playing around but holy God, Hyunjin felt like he'd just had his soul ripped from his body.

He felt his blush ripen rapidly to a lovely tomato red when of course, of *fucking* course, the door leading from the house to the garage, opened.

“Hey Bambi, dinner - *oh!”* His mom froze, body halfway through the doorway, hand still on the door knob.

The pause only lasted a beat before his mom was flying towards Felix, her face nearly split in two by her grin. “Oh and who do we have here?” She grabbed his hand, already shaking it *vigorously*.

“Mom-”

“Hi!” Felix chirped effortlessly, the only thing betraying his nervousness being the tightening of his tail around his waist. “I'm Felix! You must be Jin Jin’s mom. Jinnie, your mom is so pretty!”

His mom giggled like a school girl, still gripping Felix's hand but no longer trying to yank his shoulder from the fucking socket at least.

“Oh, such a charmer!” She said with a smile before unwillingly ripping her gaze from Felix's smiling face to look at her son.

“Hyunnie, how come you didn't tell me you had a friend over?”

“Oh, that's my fault, Mrs. Hwang.” Felix answered for him, smiling a little shyly at Hyunjin. “I showed up unannounced.”

“I didn't mind,” Hyunjin said, his mouth completely disconnected from his brain but hey, at least it was honest.

“Well of course you didn't!” His mom said, probably already clocking the fact that Felix was a living, breathing angel whose very presence was a blessing.

“He's only saying that because I brought him brownies.” Felix said with a grin, motioning to the tupperware searing behind him.

And just like Hyunjin had, he saw the wheels turning in her head before they inevitably clicked into place. “Wait, are those the brownies from the bake sale!”

“Depends on if you liked them or not,” Felix answered playfully. But Hyunjin saw the nervous little tick to his fingers. The way they wanted to reach for his tail, and play with the soft fur. Like self soothing.

“They didn't even last the weekend.” His mom deadpanned, giving Felix a little eyebrow raise for good measures, daring him to argue.

“Well in that case then yes. Yes, I did make those brownies.” Felix said, his tail loosening a little and his tail finally dropping back down to swish lightly behind him.

Hyunjin caught the way his mom's eyes followed momentarily, probably just now realizing that Felix was a hybrid. He wondered if his mom had ever known a hybrid before. After all, when she'd been a kid, they'd been at least a little bit more common.

But she didn't say anything about it. Her smile only brightened. “Well Felix, since you brought dessert, it's only fair that you stay for dinner.”

Hyunjin wasn't sure if he loved his mom at this moment or wanted to evaporate into thin air. Apparently, he was capable of both, so yay multitasking but also holy shit, Felix? In his house? With his *parents?* Eating sweet and spicy pork?!

Was this a dream or a nightmare? He couldn't tell yet. It all hinged on if his mom called him Bambi again and if Felix noticed.

“Jin Jin?”

The aforementioned brunette snapped back to reality and zeroed in on the blond who was rocking from heel to toe like he was being extra

nice and polite to get the answer he wanted.

“Yeah?”

“Is it okay if I stay?”

What was he gonna say? *No?*

Ridiculous.

“Of course, Lix.”

His mom clapped her hands excitedly, eyes bouncing back and forth between Hyunjin and Felix like she had so many things she wanted to say.

But she merely nodded excitedly and edged her way back towards the door. “Alright well dinner will be ready in about a half hour so get to a good stopping point and wash up.”

Her eyes darted down to Hyunjin's filthy hands. “Especially you, Bambi.”

Okay, so tonight was going to be a nightmare. Hey, at least it was confirmed early so he knew to go on the offense.

And by *go on the offensive,* he really just meant cornering his mom early in the evening under the guise of helping to set the table and *aggressively* begging her to not embarrass him.

Something about the glint in her eyes made him feel like it would be a lost cause. She slipped back inside, the door closing behind her. And for a second, a single second, Hyunjin really thought he wouldn't mention it. He even *dared* to hope that perhaps Felix had gone temporarily deaf.

And then,

“So…Bambi?”

He groaned, nearly dropping to his knees in defeat. “Just…pretend you didn't hear it?”

“Why?” Felix asked with a giggle, edging closer and nudging Hyunjin with the toe of his boot.

“Because it's *embarrassing,”* he said, stating the obvious.

“No it's not! It's *cute*!”

He appreciated the effort but he couldn't help the way he rolled his eyes on instinct.

But Felix's eyes caught it and narrowed, his ears probably flattening under his hat in a wannabe intimidating way. “Are you saying I'm *not* the authority on cute things?”

That wasn't really the angle he'd expected the blond to take. But in his defense, he'd only been verbal with his peers for like, the last couple of weeks. He was new to this whole ‘*conversation’* thing in general.

“Hyunjin, I have bedazzled not one, not two but *five* backpacks. I used *exclusively* glitter gel pens last year for all of my assignments, *including* a ten page essay on global economics in the 20th century. I sign my name with ears and whiskers and all the holes I have to cut in my skirts and pants for my tail? They're in the shape of little hearts!”

Hyunjin did not know what to do with this information but he could feel it worming it's way deep into his brain, ready to *destroy* him in his dreams.

“I not only *know* cute, Jin Jin. I *am* cute. I'm a freaking kitten hybrid for crying out loud! A fluffy one!”

Amen to that.

“So if I say Bambi is cute? It's cute. Okay?”

“Y-yes sir.” Hyunjin said, feeling weirdly put in his place and ever so slightly turned on. He felt a blush attacking his cheeks but he focused instead on how Felix preened with his victory.

Hyunjin could *feel* how his ears immediately perked up, perfect little fluffy triangles again. His tail even seemed to fluff up somehow, swishing delicately beside him.

“Alright! So what do you think you figured out?”

And for a moment, Hyunjin had *no* fucking clue what he was talking about. But after a deep breath of dusty air, he shook his head and reordered his thoughts. “Oh uh, the drive chain. I think that might be what's wrong. I need to measure the chain movement and then I should know.”

“And then what? Is it hard to fix?”

“Shouldn't be.” He said, popping the bike into neutral so he could spin the back tire slowly. “Might only need to clean and lube it.”

He heard the blond snicker and mutter the word lube under his breath. He wanted to jokingly ask him how old he was but there was no way in hell he was ready to joke about *lube* with *Felix*.

Sure enough, the chain had a bit too much movement, the slack a bit too much.

“That's it! That's the issue.” Hyunjin said, feeling pride at having solved another puzzle. He also had to admit that it felt pretty good to figure it out in front of Felix too. Especially with the way Felix waved his pretend pom poms again and smiled like he'd just solved world hunger.

He scoured the shelves that lined the back wall of the garage until he found a bottle of kerosene. Why they owned this, he did not know. But he was grateful because they definitely didn't have a cleaner specifically for chains and, according to the Internet, this would work just fine.

He emptied out a spray bottle filled with Lord knows what and rinsed it in the sink. They had had *one* house that didn't have a utility sink. But after Hyunjin had stained the porcelain sink in the kitchen cleaning out his paint brushes, his parents had vowed to *only* get houses with at least one sink that they were willing to ruin.

He filled it carefully with kerosene, using a little funnel he found and grabbed another rag from the pile of threadbare ones available.

“What's that?” Felix asked. He edged closer, his eyes wide and interested. It was cute, the way his curiosity truly got the best of him sometimes. Like he couldn't stop his feet from floating forward even if he wanted to.

“Kerosene.” He said, slowly turning the back wheel and spraying the liquid onto the chain. “It's supposed to clean it.”

Felix hummed, inching closer as he watched like it was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

The outside was starting to shine dully but Hyunjin had to wonder about the inside of the chain. The part that actually touched the

sprockets and probably had the most wear. He tried to peer behind it but other than shoving his head against the wheel entirely, he couldn't get a good look.

“Hey Lix?” He asked, still trying to find a good angle to investigate with. “Over on the shelf, in the blue bin there should be an old toothbrush. Can you grab it for me?”

“Yes!” Felix sounded *far* too excited at the prospect of helping. But he ran to the shelf, excitedly searching for the blue bin and ripping the lid off like he expected to find treasure inside. It was just old cleaning products and ruined sponges and brushes. But still, he pulled the dirty toothbrush out like it was a fucking scepter, running it over to Hyunjin with a breathless, “Here you go!”

Hyunjin smiled at him, carefully plucking it from his little fingers so he wouldn't get grease on him. “Thanks.”

He was able to get the toothbrush behind the chain, scrubbing it as thoroughly as he could without being able to actually see it.

Once he was pretty satisfied that it was cleaned, he set his spray bottle down and used the old rag to wipe away any excess grime.

“Now what?”

“Lube.” Hyunjin said, very pleased with himself when he didn't choke on the word.

“Where's the lube?” Felix asked, sending Hyunjin into full blown panic.

In some other dimension, one where Hyunjin was calm, cool and collected, he'd answer with some comment about how it was in the nightstand in his bedroom and would Felix like to help him find it? And Felix would blush and coyly nod his head, letting Hyunjin lead him up the stairs by the hand which totally wouldn't shake because alternate universe Hyunjin had had totally held someone's hand before and kissed someone and maybe even had sex.

But it was *not* an alternate universe and Hyunjin's virgin brain was stuck on the phrase *where's the lube* coming from *Felix.*

“Is this it?” Felix asked, already back at the shelf and rummaging through the collection of bottles on the second to top shelf. He'd pulled down a bottle that indeed said lubrication on it and Hyunjin

nodded, desperately trying to clear his impure thoughts.

Felix grinned, skipping back over to hand it to Hyunjin. The taller man took it, clearing his throat to say thank you.

He knew there was probably a better way to do this but dinner was coming up soon and he wanted to get this part done. So he twisted the cap off and poured a little of the lube onto the tips of his fingers, gingerly and carefully working it onto the chain.

But when it came time to get the back of the chain, he ran into the same problem as earlier; his hands were too big to effectively do the job.

He paused, looking around for a solution and coming up dry. The toothbrush would probably be fine but he couldn't help but imagine its uneven, scruffy bristles missing spots.

“Whatcha looking for?” Felix asked, head tilted to the side curiously.

“I need something to get the lube behind the chain. My fingers won't fit.”

Perhaps it was a trick of the light but he swore he saw a little blush flood Felix's face before he was squaring his shoulders and walking over. “I can help! Look, I have tiny hands.”

He held them out proudly as if Hyunjin hadn't been borderline obsessed with those delicate little fingers from day one.

“Lix, you don't have to do that,” he said immediately. He couldn't imagine asking someone like Felix to do manual labor or allow him to put his precious little hands near anything dirty or greasy.

“I know but I want to! Come on Jin Jin, let me help!”

“But…it'll ruin your nails.” He said, eyeing the pale baby pink he had coating his nails. It was already starting to chip a little. Squeezing them into a little metal cave wasn't going to help.

But the blond shrugged before smiling at Hyunjin, eyebrow raised. “I guess you'll just have to redo them for me then.”

Hyunjin blinked. A perfectly acceptable reason to hold Felix's hand? Being handed to him on a silver fucking platter?

“Uh, okay. Yeah. I can do that.” He agreed, feeling his heart

drumming eagerly in his chest. “But only if you're sure.”

The blond nodded happily and knelt down next to Hyunjin. He hated seeing his bare knees on the dirty concrete floor but Felix didn't seem to mind. He merely tossed his braids over his shoulder and straightened his frog hat as if he meant serious business. He shoved the too big sleeve of his cardigan over his elbows but they promptly fell back down to his wrists.

He grumbled and stood, shrugging off his offensively loud cardigan and draping it over the brownies on the stool.

Hyunjin watched with hungry eyes as Felix returned to his side. His yellow and white gingham dress was clearly meant for summer. It was held up by two little spaghetti straps that seemed to only be a formality. Other than that, it was miles of creamy skin. All down his neck and his uncovered collarbones. His sharp little shoulders and the slender arms that ended in those heartbreaking little hands.

He didn't think he'd ever seen someone's shoulder and *blushed* before but there he was, struggling to breath as the blond resumed his position next to him on the floor.

“Alright! So what do I do?” He asked eagerly, his little fingers wiggling in anticipation.

“I just need the backside of the chain lubed.” He said, tapping his index in the chain in question.

The blond nodded, holding out his hand like a surgeon awaiting his scalpel. “Lube me.”

Hyunjin's heart couldn't take much more of this. There was no *way* that the blond who giggled at the mere mention of the word lube, didn't know *exactly* what he was doing. But damn, his poker face was good.

So Hyunjin tried to act like a normal human who definitely wasn't thinking about lubing up his crush’s fingers and immediately poured out too much.

“Jinnie!” Felix squealed with a giggle. “That's too much!”

The internet said there was no such thing as too much lube but sure. “Sorry,” he muttered, cheeks heated.

“Okay, now show me what to do.”

There was no way he could verbalize this or anything anymore. His soul had vacated his body long ago and each comment from Felix had him slipping further and further from reality.

So he decided to just jump off the cliff entirely, grabbing Felix's wrist lightly in between his long fingers and guiding him to the chain. He tucked those little fingers behind it but stayed close. Slick hand over slick hand.

“Here.” He said.

“O-okay.” Felix responded, eyes glued to the side of Hyunjin's face. He blinked slowly before tearing his gaze away and focusing on the task at hand.

He wiggled his fingers experimentally, a little squelching noise making the blond giggle and Hyunjin bite his tongue to hold in his whimper.

God, what sweet, unexpected torture. He'd pay for his later, after Felix left and his eyes closed and these moments were turned filthy in his dreams.

“Like this?”

“You're doing great, Lix.”

The blond smiled, brow furrowing again as he worked his way down the chain, carefully spreading the lube and trying his hardest to be thorough. He liked how much effort he put into something simply because it mattered to Hyunjin. It was endearing.

By the time Felix had declared the job done, Hyunjin's breath had returned to him and he was able to smile appreciatively at the blond.

“Thanks for your help,” he said, rising up with cracking knees and an aching spine. He reached down to help Felix to his feet but when lubed hand met lubed hand, he lost his grip almost immediately.

The blond fell back on his butt and Hyunjin followed, his center of gravity wrecked. He felt cool concrete under his knees and his hand flung out, ready to act as a barrier between Felix's head and the floor. He squeezed his eyes shut, thinking *don't crush him. Please, don't crush him.*

If he literally crushed his first crush, he'd never recover from it.

A heavy second passed before he creaked his eyes open, terrified he'd find the other hurt beneath him.

But all he saw were wide brown eyes staring back at him, closer than ever. His reflexes had done their job, the back of that precious head cradled in one hand while the other was planted firmly on the ground. His knees screamed from the impact but it was better that then the direct pelvis to pelvis connection that would have happened if he hadn't caught himself.

But there they lay, like any stupid romcom that Hyunjin secretly loved. The beautiful blond laid out on the floor, hair flowing through Hyunjin's fingers and looking up at him with melted chocolate eyes.

Noses only an inch apart, Hyunjin stared with wonder at the perfect creation under him. It was thrilling and terrifying to be this close to everything you wanted.

“Are you okay?” He asked quietly.

The blond nodded, head fitted so perfectly in the cup of his large palm.

“Yeah. Are you?”

He nodded in return before grimacing as he sat back on his knees, pulling Felix up with him. “Mostly.”

“Mostly?” Felix’s eyes fluttered down his body, concern deep in his eyes that made Hyunjin's heart jolt.

“Hit my knees pretty hard but don't worry, my pride hurts worse.”

The blonde pouted as Hyunjin stood with a chuckle and reached his hand back down. “I promise I won't drop you this time.”

The blond rolled his eyes and grasped Hyunjin's hand fearlessly, lacing their fingers together to strengthen their hold.

The brunette swallowed thickly as he hoisted the smaller man to his feet. He didn't want to let go. This probably didn't even really count as holding hands but he *loved it.* His little fingers fit so perfectly in-between his. Like they were made to be there.

But all too soon, Felix was pulling his hand free with pretty pink

cheeks and asking if they should get washed up for dinner.

Hyunjin nodded, leading the blond over to the utility sink in the corner before pausing. They didn't have any clean towels to dry their hands on so instead he motioned Felix towards the door to the house.

“Let's wash up inside,” he said, feeling a little out of body as he led the blond into his house.

He watched as Felix stepped through the threshold, his tail sticking close to his body as he surveyed the new space. He immediately slipped his boots off, placing them neatly by the front door and leaving him in his knee though socks. He took one step before suddenly remembering his hat. He took it off, hanging it on the row of hooks they used for their coats.

Hyunjin watched with delight as Felix's little ears sprung up, happy to be free of their prison. They twitched from side to side, ecstatic to be free and fascinated by the gentle sound of pots and pans coming from the kitchen.

His little hands came up to pat his hair but Hyunjin lunged, swiftly plucking his filthy fingers away from his shiny hair.

“Don't want to get grease in your hair,” he said shyly, dropping his wrist even though everything in him *screamed* to hold on.

Felix's eyes widened as he brought his hand into view. “Oh my god, you're my hero.” He said with a dead serious face and Hyunjin couldn't help but laugh.

“Come on,” he urged, leading him toward the small powder room off the foyer.

They washed up quickly, Hyunjin watching as Felix took clean fingers to his hair, patting down the whisper thin curls that had plastered themselves around his hairline.

“Is your hair curly?” Hyunjin asked, visions of a wild haired Felix, freckles out and shining in the sun running rampant in his mind.

The blond shrugged. “Sorta? More wavey I guess but when it gets real humid like this, it'll get sort of frizzy and curly.” He frowned at it in the mirror and Hyunjin couldn't have that.

“It's cute.” He blurted.

The blond smiled at him in the mirror, his eyes sparkling like mad. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

They stared at each other in the mirror for a beat too long before Hyunjin heard his mom calling them for dinner.

“Coming!” He shouted back, breaking the spell and leading the blond out to the kitchen.

It was surreal to see Felix in his kitchen. Once again, faced with new scents and sights, his eyes went wide, his ears rotating every which way to try to catch every sizzle and pop from the stove.

“Perfect timing!” Hyunjin's mom said as they appeared in the doorway, Felix peaking around Hyunjin with a smile. “Dinner is just about ready. Jinnie, why don't you get your friend something to drink?”

He nodded, heading for the refrigerator to survey the options. “We have water, some cold chai and cranberry juice.”

“Water is fine.” Felix said, floating further into the kitchen with nervous hands wringing his tail lightly.

“Do you want any help, Mrs. Hwang?”

God, Hyunjin nearly melted at that. He loved his parents. His entire life, they'd been the only consistent thing. And to have his crush, in his kitchen and asking his mom if he could help? It was swoon worthy behavior to put it lightly.

And perhaps his mom sort of agreed because her eyes got all soft as she gazed approvingly at him. “Oh sweetie, call me Seon-mi. And I appreciate the offer but I think we're good to go. I hope you like sweet and sour pork.”

Felix nodded excitedly. “It's one of my favorites!”

“Hyunjin's too.”

The blond smiled back at Hyunjin like this was some of the best news he could have ever received. “I see he has good taste.” The blond said with a wink.

That wink nearly *ended* Hyunjin.

However, Hyunjin very casually hid his demise behind a sip of water. After all, he was a pro at disappearing into the background of a scene.

But then again, it didn't work as well when Felix was around because the blond simply refused to let Hyunjin go unseen.

His mom started to walk the food over to the table, Felix immediately grabbing a dish and following, hellbent on helping no matter what.

His mom smiled sweetly at him, looking like she wanted to pat his head but thinking twice. Hyunjin wondered if he would need to have an explicit conversation with his mom later about not touching Felix's ears without permission. Then again, that assumed that Felix would ever come back over and there was still plenty of time for Hyunjin to fuck things up so perhaps he was just getting ahead of himself.

His mom was just about to go collect his father when he appeared in the doorway. He didn't look too surprised to see Felix standing by a dining chair, asking Hyunjin where he was sitting, which meant his mom had probably *torn* through the house to tell him that their anti-social son had made a friend who she'd conned into staying for dinner.

"Oh! Hi! I'm Felix!" The blond was bouncing over to Jun-Ho with his hand extended. His other hand held his tail securely, seeking a little comfort.

"Nice to meet you Felix, I'm Hyunjin's Dad, Jun-Ho."

Felix smiled broadly, his hand disappearing entirely inside Jun-Ho's handshake.

When he let go, Felix was looking over his shoulder and running back over to Hyunjin. "Why is your entire family so pretty, Jin Jin?"

He paused, unsure how he was supposed to not only answer but *process* that question. Did that mean Felix thought *he* was pretty too? Or was he just being his charming self and making a killer first impression.

"Um…genetics?"

His mom rolled her eyes very supportively while his dad chuckled and Felix giggled.

"But seriously, you're all so tall!" Felix said in awe as they all took a

seat finally.

“I wish I was tall sometimes. But then again, I probably couldn't be a flier on the cheer squad if I was so I guess it's not so bad.”

Hyunjin watched as his mom's eyes widened, her beckoning for a plate to start piling food on. Felix looked around and finally offered his, seeing Hyunjin and his dad both waiting for the guest to be served first.

“Oh, so you're on the cheer squad?” His mother asked before he *saw* the light bulb go off over her head. A calculating look slid into her eyes and Hyunjin had to suppress his shudder. That look usually meant trouble for him. It usually meant she knew too much.

“Were you at the fundraiser Hyunnie went to last weekend?”

“You bet! I'm the one who invited him!”

Hyunjin felt his blush overtaking his face because he just *knew* that his mom knew. He could tell from the subtle shift in her smile that she could *tell* what was going on here: Hyunjin had a big, fat, hopeless crush on the kitten at the table.

God, how embarrassing to think about that his mom was witnessing just how far out of his league he'd fallen.

But Felix was privy to none of it and happily continued as he accepted his heaping plate of food back. “And thank God I did because it was *so boring* before he showed up! I mean, I'm sure the kids working the car wash side were having fun but I was all lonely before Jin Jin got there.”

He blew on a steaming piece of pork and smiled at the taller boy next to him. “Totally saved my Saturday.”

Hyunjin felt his blush deepen, a heat crawling down his neck that he tried to play off by shoving a too hot piece of pork into his mouth. He fanned the fire helplessly, instantly regretting the tactic.

Jun-Ho blinked once at Hyunjin's plight, decided there was nothing he could do for his helpless son and instead turned to their guest. “So what exactly does a flier do on the cheer squad?”

Felix's eyes got all sparkly. “Fly.” He said with a giggle before answering fully. “I'm the one who gets thrown up in the air and lifted

and stuff."

"That sounds sort of scary," his dad said, his lifelong fear of heights probably adding that little shake to his voice.

Felix nodded, his over the top exuberance mellowing a little. "It is. In fact, I didn't agree to be a flier until Binnie joined the squad last year. I'll only stunt if he's the one there to catch me." He said it with conviction.

"Why?" Hyunjin couldn't help but ask.

Felix looked at him and smiled. "Well for one, that guy could lift a *bus,* have you seen his arms? Good *god.*"

Hyunjin had to wonder if this had something to do with Felix being a *little freak for arms.*

But his thought was derailed when Felix continued. "But it's also just…it's not that I don't trust the other people on the squad. I do. Mostly. But I don't trust them like I do Binnie." He shrugged, like he didn't really know how to explain it but also like he wasn't too concerned about it either. He felt how he felt and that was enough.

"He sounds like a good friend." Seon-mi said with a sweet smile.

Felix nodded adamantly while taking a big bite of food and chewing demurely behind his hand. "Oh, he's great. And obsessed with Hyunjin."

Hyunjin sputtered, mid sip when he heard it. "No he's not." He disagreed immediately.

"Yes huh!" Felix said, twisting in his seat to look at Hyunjin with wide eyes. "He keeps trying to sit next to you at lunch even though it's *my* spot!"

"That was one time."

"Yes and it was *unacceptable."* Felix said with a pout. Hyunjin knew he was just being Felix - feisty and sassy and teasing - but it still felt really nice to have him stake a claim like this. No matter how silly.

When Hyunjin's mouth opened and closed like a dumb fish a few times, zero comebacks coming to mind, the blond took mercy on him and turned back to the table.

“So what do you do for a living?” Felix asked politely toward his parents, listening politely and with great interest as Hyunjin's dad told Felix of his work as a consultant. Of his rise through the ranks. Of all the towns and cities and houses they'd lived in.

Hyunjin knew the story. Of course he did; he'd lived it. But it was odd to hear it spoken in such a consolidated way. One event after the other after the other with hardly any time to breathe between boxes. Packing and unpacking in an endless loop. He had to admit, if sounded more dramatic like this; told in one go over dishes of soy sauce and kimchi.

He watched the stories pile up on Felix’s shoulders, making his spine sag a little under their weight. Perhaps he was bored? It was a rather long story and it *was* rather repetitive. Settle down, get the next assignment, pack the house and move. Rinse and repeat. Over and over.

But then he felt a soft fluff tickling his ankle. He glanced down to find Felix's tail trying to wind itself around him. Trying to hold onto him as if wanting to offer comfort.

Which was crazy, right? But that's what it felt like, at least.

“I'm sorry, I've been rambling on for far too long,” Jun-Ho chucked at himself, rubbing the back of his neck in a way that Hyunjin had definitely learned from him.

“Don't apologize,” Felix said effortlessly. “I asked. Thank you for sharing.” He even gave a slight nod of the head, as if truly honored by the details.

“Well let me get this cleaned up and we can have some of your wonderful brownies, alright?” Seon-mi stood with a broad smile but Felix bolted upright as well.

“Let me help! I-I can w-wash the dishes.”

Hyunjin was pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to see the little flinch that Felix tried to hide. The way the blond seemed to have to *force* those words out, even if he still sounded genuine. But Hyunjin did notice. How could he not? When Felix’s ears flattened ever so slightly in displeasure and his tail fell a little flat, like it wanted to tuck between his legs.

And then it hit him.

Felix hated water. He hated getting wet. But here he was, willing to make himself uncomfortable to make a good impression. To be polite. He'd trudged through the rain, albeit decked out in the cutest frog hat, rain boot combo and umbrella but *still*.

Him even being here today had taken effort. He'd made up his mind that he wanted to see Hyunjin and bring him brownies and Hyunjin wouldn't let that be a one way street. He *couldn't*.

It was like Changbin had said: the only way you got better at anything was through practice.

"Lix, you don't have to do that." He said, standing as well and taking the plates the blond had started to collect.

"B-but I want to help-"

"Then…I'll wash. You can dry, okay?"

He watched with blond's shoulders sag ever so slightly with relief and it caused a swell of pride in Hyunjin's chest.

"Okay." Felix said softly, eyes thankful as he followed Hyunjin to the sink. He ignored the way his mom was gazing at them, chin literally in her fucking palm as she looked at them dreamily.

He got it, he did. It must be *fascinating* to watch your son interact with a peer for the first time in 18 years. He just wished she'd be a little less obvious in her staring.

The brunette took up his post in front of the sink, turning the faucet handle to the left and getting the water nice and warm before soaping up the sponge and getting to work. He handed the first plate to Felix and the blond whispered, "Thank you."

Hyunjin nodded, assuming he meant for the plate or something but as he started on the second one, he heard Felix's low voice again.

"I didn't want to seem rude. And I *did* want to help clean up. I just…"

"You don't like getting wet." Hyunjin said easily.

"Yeah." Felix said softly, accepting the second plate and slowly drying it, dragging the towel around and around the edge counterclockwise. "I know it's silly-"

"Lix, it's *not* silly." Hyunjin said, pausing his work to look at the

blond. “You’re allowed to be whoever you are and that *includes* all the kitten parts.”

The first part of his sentence rang through his own head.

You’re allowed to be whoever you are.

Perhaps he should follow his own advice. Especially with all the effort Lix was putting in here tonight. He couldn’t, in good faith, sit here and tell him that he should throw caution to the wind and expose every little thing he’d ever hidden away about himself to a near stranger if he wasn’t willing to do the same.

Hyunjin took a deep breath. “Plus, I don’t want your fingers getting all pruny before I do your nails.”

There was a beat of silence before he felt the warmth of Felix pressing lightly into his side. Shoulder to shoulder. “Really? You mean it?”

“I told you I would.”

Felix bounced on his toes, nearly throwing the last plate in his excitement. “Oh, thank you Jin Jin! Thank you! Oh, I’m so excited!”

“Why are we excited?” Seon-mi asked as she floated over, plating the brownies and grabbing a fistful of fresh forks.

“Jin Jin is gonna do my nails for me since I helped with his bike!” The blond proudly showed off his chipped and ragged nails like he was quite proud of their shabbiness.

His mom raised her eyebrow, looking *very* approving of this development. “Well isn’t that sweet of you Hyunnie.”

“Jin Jin’s the sweetest!” Felix said, bumping shoulders with him as they sat back down, his tail immediately finding its way back around his ankle under the table.

He knew that he was the only one the blond let touch his ears so he had to imagine that this tail thing was also pretty rare. He couldn't help but feel a little special. A little like he was being given a gift for reasons he didn't quite understand. Regardlessly, he likes the idea of Felix feeling comfortable around him. Enough to let go a little and relax. After all, that's what Felix did for him. Even if Hyunjin spent half of their interactions stuck in a hopeless thought loop of how embarrassingly in love he was and how embarrassingly out of his

league Felix was.

“Well, you're in for a treat. Hyunjin is *very* talented at doing nails.” His mother smiled at him, looking mighty proud that her son could pass as a half decent nail tech.

“Oh, I know! He showed me pictures of his work when we met and I've been dreaming of this moment since.”

Felix giggled and his mom did too but he still caught how her eyes flicked to Hyunjin, a light coming from deep within. She was probably intrigued as to how her son - her reserved, quiet, borderline secretive son - had ended up baring his soul (nail pics) to a stranger upon first meeting.

Really, the answer was simple: the stranger was cute and perfect. Ergo, Hyunjin had decided to throw caution to the wind and risk it all in an attempt to foster genuine connection for once.

“So what color are you thinking?” Seon-Mi asked around a delicate bite of brownie.

They chatted easily, Felix’s natural charm hooking both of his parents immediately. He could tell by his mom's ever present smile and his dad's gentle eyes that they liked him. And God, it felt really nice to watch Felix sit with his parents, talking like they'd known each other for more than just an hour.

When the brownies had been eaten, Hyunjin tried to gather the plates again but was shooed off by his mom. She insisted that they go take care of Lixie's nails because yes, he was already ‘Lixie’ to her.

Felix objected, trying to offer his own help and even going so far as to offer to wash dishes again when Hyunjin rolled his eyes, grabbed him by the wrist and hauled him up the stairs.

His heart was thundering in his chest at the feel of that steady pulse under his fingertips but he didn’t want Felix trying to sacrifice himself again for the sake of a good first impression that he’d *already* nailed.

“Lix,” He sighed, not sure how to say it without sounding rude. “You don’t need to, I don’t know. Try to impress them or whatever.” He shrugged, releasing Felix’s wrist when they got to the top of the stairs.

“I just want them to like me,” Felix said in a shy voice. He turned around when they reached his closed door and looked behind him to

find the blond shyly burying his toes into the plush carpet.

He heard that little voice of Binnie echo through his head again, about practice making perfect or whatever and god, he was just so tired of holding himself in check. It was exhausting. And every time he broke free from his self imposed shell even a little bit, Felix seemed to like it. Plus, he was about to open the door to his room and expose all his soft secrets. There would be no hiding away in there. Everything he was, everything he longed to be, was plastered all over the walls in his sketches and painting. His candles and flowers showed a side of him that directly opposed the cultivated image of ripped jeans and face piercings.

It was all the things he'd ever been teased over, all the things the bullies had found issue with when he was younger. All the things he'd been *taught* to hide away by his peers.

So really. Truly. What was there to hide anymore?

He reached back out, hand nervous but determined and grabbed Felix's wrist again. Too scared to commit to grabbing his hand but this was close enough. He could feel his pulse again and he swore it sped up under his fingertips.

"Lixie, they already love you."

The words were easy because they were honest. What was harder was holding eye contact when he said it and making sure that Felix really heard him.

"So please…just be yourself when you're here, okay?"

He silently agreed to do the same as the blond nodded, a pink blush blooming on his face.

Hyunjin nodded, satisfied by the answer and decided to just rip off the bandaid. He twisted the knob on his door and swung the door open.

"So, this is my room."

Chapter End Notes

CODE RED! CODE RED! Kitten Lixie has landed in Hyunjin's bedroom!!! See you on Thursdayyyyyy!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> Hello, hello and happy Thursday! I'm posting this chapter literally right before I leave for the airport to fly to New York to see STRAY KIDS AT GOV BALL 🧿🧿🧿Short note today because my brain is actually not functioning so LET'S GO!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hyunjin stood back, letting Felix enter first and as the blond examined his room, he examined his guest.

Much like Felix did in any new space, he crept in slowly. His ears were on a constant swivel, trying to understand any new sounds and staying alert. His tail was wrapped tightly around his body, out of the way of any unexpected danger that might be lurking by Hyunjin's bookshelf.

Hyunjin's bookshelf that was filled with poetry and cheesy romcoms. The ones that Felix was curiously reading the spines of.

"Wow," He breathed, his eyes gliding over all those broken, flaky spines that he'd saved from countless used bookstores from every town he'd ever lived in. "Have you read all of these?"

"Not all of them, but…most, yeah." He said quietly. When you spent as much time alone as Hyunjin had, reading was a good hobby to have.

The blond hummed, sounding impressed before he turned around and took in the collections of mismatched bottles stuffed full with flowers in his windowsill. He'd repurposed old wine bottles his parents had finished off, recycled rinsed pickle jars and coffee cans. He'd found an old, antique vase at a flea market many moons ago and treated it like a priceless artifact even though it probably just belonged to some old lady who'd bought it for a nickel during the great depression.

"Oh, *Jin Jin,*" Felix breathed, his tail unwinding from around his body, like it had already decided it was in a safe space.

But then the blond was moving on from his plethora of flowers and gazing at his walls. Bland and white and not worth painting, he'd instead wallpapered them with sketches. Some were old, with shaky

lines and a lot of heart. He liked those ones because they reminded him how far he'd come. And some were new, made just over the summer. In between runs and the anxiety of a new school year. And he liked those ones too because they reminded him how much he still had to learn.

He watched as the shorter man's mouth fell open, seemingly speechless as he took in the dozens upon dozens of sketches and watercolor pieces he'd taped to his wall with painters tape. Easily removable and leaving no trace. Temporary.

"Jinnie, o-oh my-did you do these?" Felix turned in a trance, his eyes wide and filled with so many swirling emotions that Hyunjin couldn't even *begin* to unravel. There were so *many* but the little tilt to his lips made him think that a majority of them were positive.

"Yes." He said quietly. He felt nervous, hands shoved in his pockets as far as they would go. He focused on his feet in the thick carpet, imagining the fibers crawling up and over him, keeping him standing and secure.

But all of his thoughts scattered when he felt a warm body slam into his.

He looked down, surprised to find the tips of fluffy ears right under his nose. Felix's arms constricted around him tightly, his tail joining in and wrapping around Hyunjin's waist.

There was a moment where Hyunjin thought he might cry. But not because of his threadbare nerves as he would have expected.

But because of the smell of peaches clouding over him and the warmth pressed against him, *clinging* to him and the idea that not once, ever in his life, had anyone held him like this. Not even his parents.

Because this was Felix and this was different.

He let a shuddering breath out before letting his arms move on their own, circling around the blond and lightly, ever so terrified, held him in return.

He wasn't really sure what he'd done to deserve this but *god,* it felt good to be seen and accepted. It felt good to open the door and have someone rush in. It felt good to end up in someone's arms.

He tilted his head down, brain swimming through a fog of peaches and buried his nose carefully between Felix's ears, taking a deep breath in.

The blond merely tightened his hold. "Jin, you're *incredible."* He said it with such reverence that it made Hyunjin blush.

"How come you never *told me* that you're so, so *talented!"*

Hyunjin shrugged. "It never came up."

Felix huffed out a little laugh and pulled back, much to Hyunjin's panic. But the shorter man didn't let go. He merely leaned back, keeping his arms around Hyunjin and looking up at him with such a devastating height difference.

The blond rolled his eyes with a smile, leveling the friendliest glare Hyunjin had ever seen at him and giving him a playful shove to the shoulder. "Okay well then you're going to do my nails and tell me all about how you became such an amazing artist."

Hyunjin chuckled, biting his bottom lip and shaking his head as he felt the blond shove his shoulder again.

He could fight back, say something about how he wasn't that good or how he didn't want to bore Lix with the details but he decided not to. Because he was done holding back and he wanted Felix to *know* him. More than anything.

"Let me go get my supplies," He said, regretfully letting go. "Make yourself comfortable." He offered, stepping down the hall to retrieve all his tools and polish options from the bathroom.

When he got back to his room, Felix was once again standing in front of his makeshift gallery wall, standing on tiptoes and trying to get a closer look at some of the ones hung up near the crown molding.

"Alright Lix, time to pick your color," he called, glancing at his desk and deciding they'd need more room for the two of them. He was about to sit on the floor when Felix took it upon himself to flop on the bed, crossing his legs primly and short circuiting Hyunjin's brain entirely.

How on *earth* could so much confidence fit in such a *little* person?

"Gimme," Lix said, making grabby hands towards Hyunjin's plastic

tote of nail colors.

On shaky legs that really gave his mom's nickname of Bambi some truth, he walked his soulless body over to the bed. His spirit was somewhere near the ceiling, staring down at him with disbelief.

He sat down gingerly on the edge of the mattress and Felix ripped the box from his hand like a feral animal, excitedly picking up bottle after bottle, ooing and awing over the colors.

"You have so many!"

Hyunjin shrugged. "Yeah, my parents usually get me a few for birthdays and Christmas and stuff so they sort of pile up over time."

"When is your birthday?" Felix asked, setting a few different shades of pink to the side for further consideration.

"March. You?"

"September!"

That meant it was next month. Did he get him something? That's what friends did, right? But what if he messed it up and got him something dumb? Or took it too far and got him something that exposed his true feelings like flowers or chocolates or a handmade RSVP to their own wedding?

"I usually do pink but I think I'm leaning more toward purple this time." The blond was eyeing a pale lavender.

"Well, I could do a lavender base but we could do some kind of design in pink if you want to do both?"

Hyunjin's simple idea got him an award winning smile and a belly full of butterflies.

"Really? What kind of design?" Felix was bouncing in place, his tail whipping from side to side in excitement.

Hyunjin shrugged again, that infectious smile of Lix's tugging at his own lips. "I dunno. What do you want?"

The blond's eyes went wide before narrowing in challenge. "Anything I want?"

Hyunjin nodded before clarifying, "I mean, I can't do a recreation of

the Sistine chapel but for the most part, yeah. Whatever you want."

The blond's eyes narrowed further. "I want flowers. Like my cardigan." He pointed to the simple daisies on his cardigan and the brunette nodded immediately.

"Okay. Easy."

If there was one thing on this planet that Hyunjin could do, it was paint a goddamn flower.

"And a bunny. I want a bunny on at least one finger." Felix added, his eyes starting to widen again, beginning to look not only hopeful but excited.

"Can do."

"And, and I want bows! I want bows on them too!" He declared, hands balled up tight in his lap like he was trying to keep from flapping them in excitement.

But that battle was lost the second Hyunjin nodded and asked, "What about a nail with a white and purple checkered background too? Sort of like your dress?"

"Jinnie!" Felix cried, his excitement breaking free and his body flying forward to hug him.

If this whole hugging thing was going to become a *thing,* Hyunjin was pretty sure he'd die of a heart attack before the year was over.

But this one was much shorter, the blond backing up and flopping down on his belly, one hand extended while the other propped his chin up. "Alright Jin Jin, work your magic!"

Hyunjin had to take several deep breaths to steady his shaking hands but after the base coat, he found that familiar ease and relaxation that doing nails had always given him.

He'd only ever painted his own and, occasionally, his mom's. And while it was nerve wracking to gently grip Felix's hand, working his finger into the proper position, there was still something soothing about it.

Especially as Felix's chin came down to rest on the bed, his eyes glued to Hyunjin's work and his tail slowly swooshing back and forth like he

was completely at ease. Especially as the blond started to hum some random tune that Hyunjin had never heard before but sounded nice all the same. Especially as the near silence settled around them, becoming warm like a thick blanket.

Hyunjin spent a lot of time alone. A lot of time in silence. But this felt different. It felt kinder. Warmer. More alive, in a way.

“When did you start drawing and painting and stuff?”

Hyunjin hummed, his mind stilled by the steady strokes of his brush. “Since I can remember, honestly. My mom says I was born drawing.”

Felix breathed a little giggle. “Cute,” he muttered.

And sure, a little blush still spread over Hyunjin’s cheeks but he didn’t feel that constriction in his chest that made it hard to breath. Instead, he took a deep breath and told Felix a story he’d never told anyone before.

“I used to have these really vivid dreams when I was younger. Nothing bad or anything, not like nightmares just…dreams. All kinds. And I would wake up and try to tell my parents about them but I never felt like I had the words. So I started drawing.” He smiled to himself, remembering his young frustration at not feeling understood, even then. He had to admire his younger self for fighting so hard to be seen and understood. Now, he hid behind layers of assumptions that he let his classmates make. And while he hated those assumptions, he also used them as armor to protect that young kid who *needed* his mom to know *exactly* how the sky castle in his dream had looked.

When had he gone from being this open book, begging to be read to this closed off tome, determined to be lost to time and history?

“Were you always this good?” Felix asked softly, eyes glancing up from his glossy lavender nails to the brunette hunched painfully over them and readying to do the detail work.

Hyunjin snorted. “Oh *god no*. I mean, my mom says I was good but she’s my *mom* so she has to say that.”

The blond giggled and nodded before sighing. “I wish I was good at something.”

That stopped Hyunjin in his tracks. His eyes flew up to find a head of blond hair still bowed, watching the actual paint on his nails dry.

“What do you mean? You’re good at *tons* of stuff!”

Hyunjin couldn't *imagine* someone like Felix not understanding just how amazing he was. It *hurt* him. It felt almost personal to have someone attack Felix, even if it was the blond himself.

“I don't know about that,” Felix said softly, head still bowed and watching his fingers on the bedspread.

“You're great at baking!” Hyunjin blurted out, the evidence literally half demolished in his kitchen downstairs. “And you're really good at cheer, I bet! And everyone likes you; you're so good at making friends.”

“I'm not sure that's a skill.”

“It is.” Hyunjin said solidly. He watched the blond finally peek up from under his lashes, curious at Hyunjin's tone. “Trust me. It is.”

It took a second but Felix lifted his head a bit more, slotting their gazes together more fully.

Hyunjin looked back and held his eyes, determined to prove that it was. Determined that Felix knew just how talented he was.

But he couldn't say these words looking at the blond so openly. So he grabbed a pale pink and shook the bottle, took a deep breath and carefully, softly, took Felix's fingertips in his palm. Holding them like something precious.

“I got so good at drawing because it was something I could do alone.” He said quietly. He balanced out his vulnerability by focusing on painting the silhouette of a bunny's head. “I was never good at making friends. And I mean, maybe I didn't try enough and that's on me. But even when I did…”

He trailed off, remembering the teasing remarks of his classmates. He remembered the way they'd pointed and laughed and called him a crybaby. The way they'd made him feel like showing his emotions was *bad.*

“It's not easy. To let people in. But you make it look easy.”

He didn't look up but he could *feel* Felix’s eyes on him. They were heavy but kind.

“I still hide away parts,” Felix said quietly after a long minute of silence.

Hyunjin merely shrugged. “Don't we all?” He glanced up and offered a sly smile, eyes darting to his wall of art and the row of flowers in mismatched. “Maybe we all hide away the parts of ourselves that feel misunderstood. Or the precious things that we don't *want* to be misunderstood.” Hyunjin mused idly.

He watched the blond's eyes follow his precious path; across his art and over the flowers.

It took a long minute but Hyunjin had finished the first round of daisies on the first hand when Felix whispered. “I'd understand you, Jin. All of you. If you wanted me too.”

Hyunjin swore his heart stopped before a tremendous *ache* set in. Something yawning and needy. Something that felt like *craving* but more violent. It felt like a promise he was desperate to believe.

And coming from Felix's lips, he did.

“And I’d understand all of you too, Lix.” He echoed, eyes flicking up to land on hopeful eyes. His hand reached up of its own accord, craving the feel of silky fur between his fingers. He scratched lightly at the base of Felix's ear, palm curving around the shell to cradle it gently.

“If you wanted.” he vowed quietly.

His heart was thundering in his ears, in the back of his skull, in his fingertips where they still lightly held Felix’s. He wondered if he could feel it.

But when Felix’s awestruck face broke into the sweetest smile and he tipped his head to the side, urging for more scratches, Hyunjin heard it just fine when then blond whispered, “Okay. Deal.”

The silence that followed was something that should have felt heavy or charged. It should have left Hyunjin feeling flayed open and vulnerable. But instead, he felt that same warmth settle in the room, under his skin and over his bones.

He eventually removed his hand from Felix’s fluffy ear to get back to work, earning him an adorable little pout from the blond. And maybe it was their new agreement but Hyunjin didn’t feel all that awkward as he averted his eyes and asked, “So how come I’m the only one you

let touch your ears?"

The blond coughed a little, his cheeks getting the prettiest pink to them that had Hyunjin's heart picking up speed again.

"I uh, I don't really know." Felix said, eyes once again focusing on the tiny little details Hyunjin was adding for the gingham pattern nail. "And I mean, you're not the *only* one. My mom and dad are allowed too. And my uncle's partner."

Hyunjin paused, racking the absolute *shelves* he kept of every single thing Felix had ever told him. "The bunny hybrid?"

Felix looked surprised when he mentioned it but nodded. "Yeah. That one." He said with a smile.

"Why not your other friends?" Hyunjin asked, cringing a little when he implied that he too was a friend of Felix's. But I mean…he was on his bed, painting his nails so like…if this wasn't friendship then what was?

"I don't really know." Felix said, sounding honestly a little confused by it himself. "It's not that I don't trust them or think they'll like, pull my ears or something. I just…I guess we never really talk about it."

"About what?"

"About me being a hybrid."

Hyunjin nodded. It would make sense honestly, especially if Felix tended to hide those parts away. If anyone understood the desire to fit in, it was Hyunjin.

"Do you want to?" He finished the last nail and twisted the cap back on the polish. He sat, rolling the clear top coat between his hands, waiting for the current layer to dry so he could finish up.

The blond shrugged. "Yes and no, I guess. Like…I don't want it to be my entire identity, ya know? I don't want to just be the kitten hybrid. But also…"

"It's an important part of you." Hyunjin finished for him when he stalled out.

Felix nodded. "Yeah. It's not *not* important, I guess. I just…don't know how to stop hiding." He said softly.

Hyunjin finally twisted the cap off the polish and set to adding a shiny top coat. “I get it.” And wow, did he ever. He’d spent his whole life up until Felix hiding and now, here he was, trying to take a step forward on shaky legs.

Top coat done, he twisted the cap closed and reached out to pet Felix’s ear again, forcing himself to be brave and look the blond in the eye when he said, “You just have to practice.”

Felix’s eyes were wide before he closed his eyes and sighed, leaning his head back into Hyunjin’s hand, urging him on.

“What other kitten things do you like?” Hyunjin asked curiously, cringing a little at his phrasing but truly, how were you supposed to ask that question?

“Hmmm, I guess I like naps?” Felix said with a giggle that Hyunjin mirrored. “Especially in the sun.” The blond nearly physically melted when he mentioned that and Hyunjin suddenly wanted to see his golden hair bathed in sunlight and flowing over a pillow. God, he would *kill* for that privilege.

“And uh…I like…yarn?” He said sheepishly, ducking his head under the guise of blowing on his already dry nails.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“What about it?” Surely, the images in his head weren’t accurate, right? Surely, something that cute couldn't exist. *Right?*

The blond shrugged nervously, eyes flicking up to find Hyunjin and begging him to understand like he’d promised he would. “It’s…fun to play with.” He muttered shyly.

No fucking way.

Hyunjin was going to kill himself with cuteness but he *had to see it.*

He hopped up, so beyond grateful that his delusional little brain had decided to pack his knitting supplies after he’d tried and failed to knit a sweater last year. Somehow, he’d convinced himself to pack all his supplies up and move it to the new house. He’d never been so thankful for the hoarding tendencies he had with craft supplies.

He pulled a bin out from his closet, rustling around all the packages of air dry clay and old acrylic paints until he found a slightly dusty bundle of deep navy yarn. He yelped in excitement and pulled it free, turning around to show Felix his victory by holding it high.

Felix's ears *immediately* perked up, his spine straightening and on the ready. It was like the yarn had hit the *'on'* button.

All senses heightened, his eyes followed the ball of yarn in Hyunjin's hand everywhere it went. From right hand to left, back to right, he twitched in his spot like he was having trouble standing still.

Hyunjin smiled, unwinding a long piece of it and dangling it in front of him. God, he hoped he wasn't making a fool of himself or worse, being incredibly rude. But Felix said he didn't want to hide so much and he said he trusted Hyunjin and so maybe-

"Come on, Lixie. Wanna play?"

They were the magic words apparently. The blond was up and on his feet in an instant, running toward Hyunjin with a big smile as he lunged for the yarn. Hyunjin used his height to his advantage, pulling it up higher than the blond could reach, even as he wildly jumped in place, batting at it.

He resorted to trying to climb Hyunjin which, under normal circumstances, would have had Hyunjin on his knees and hyperventilating in mere moments. But these were not ordinary circumstances. He was laughing too hard to totally register the way Felix's body was glued to his, his little feet trying to use his knee cap as a step.

Desperate to keep the yarn away from his grabby hands, Hyunjin made a dive for the bed, crashing onto the springy mattress and feeling Felix pounce next to him. The blond, breathing heavily between his giggles, rolled onto his back and reached up as far as he could, trying to grab the yarn Hyunjin proceeded to tease him with.

His pupils were dilated to a monstrous degree, all of his senses focused on Hyunjin's hand and that damn yarn and god, he was so fucking precious. How on earth could he seriously think that anyone could see this and not be enamoured? Hyunjin was sure that right now, in this moment, he was building a memory he'd cherish for the rest of his life.

Felix's tail was wild, thrashing from side to side next to him and

brushing up against Hyunjin's knee over and over in a soft, distracting sort of way.

Too drawn in by Felix's hypnotic, nearly black eyes and his breathy giggles, his hand got lazy, slacking lower and lower until finally, Felix's little fingers snagged the prize. Yelping in victory, he grabbed Hyunjin's hand and pulled it down to his face, giving it a soft bite before yanking the yarn from his loose grasp.

Had Felix just…bit him?

Hyunjin remembered a million years ago, being at his grandma's house. She'd had a cat who was old and gray, just like his grandma but she still liked to play with her catnip mice. And if you got her all riled up and excited, she would grab your hand and bite you softly, just like that. Hyunjin's grandma had called them 'love bites'.

He felt his cheeks flood with warmth at the very thought of it before snapping back into action, noticing that Felix was slowly but excitedly getting himself tangled in the yarn.

"Hey, hey, hey, careful!" Hyunjin said with a laugh, reaching out to start peeling the rings of string off of Felix.

The blond blinked, his eyes clearing a little from the haze of their play. "Sorry," He muttered, shimmying to help Hyunjin free him from his yarn prison.

"Don't apologize," Hyunjin said quickly, bunching up the yarn and setting it aside. "Did you have fun?"

The blond's blush gave it away but he still giggled and nodded. "Yeah. Did…d-did you?"

"So much fun." And he wasn't even lying. Seeing Felix that happy and getting to do something so wholesome as *play*? He honestly couldn't think of a better thing to do on his Saturday.

"Are your nails okay?" Hyunjin asked, suddenly remembering that they'd been dry but still fresh.

The blond yelped, pulling his hands up to right under his nose to inspect them closely before sighing in relief and flipping them around to show off. "They're perfect," He said with a smile before turning them back around to gaze adoringly at them.

“Oh, I would have been so mad at myself if I’d ruined them after all the work you put into them. Seriously, Jin Jin, these are *amazing*!”

He was looking so fondly at them, you’d think he was looking at his first born.

“I’m glad you like them,” Hyunjin said with a smile, softly bundling the yarn back up and shoving it in his nightstand. He wondered what other toys Feilx’s kitten side would enjoy. Perhaps it was something they could explore together.

He stood near his bed, the blond curled up on top with a relaxed tail swishing leisurely back and forth. It made Hyunjin’s heart melt a little.

But it didn’t last very long as the blond rolled over, eyes catching sight of the darkening sky outside his window. Felix sighed heavily and sat up.

“I guess I should probably get going. My parents are probably wondering where I am.” He stood slowly, almost like he didn’t truly want to leave. Hyunjin knew the feeling, he didn’t want him to go either but asking if he wanted to stay the night was not something he was even *vaguely* emotionally prepared for.

So Hyunjin nodded and led him out of his room, knowing he’d be equally captivated and haunted by the fact that Felix had been in his *bed* by the time he laid down that night.

They were getting close to the front door when Felix darted to the side, back into the kitchen to wish his parents a good night and thank them for the meal. It didn’t necessarily surprise Hyunjin when his mom pulled Felix into a hug but it *did* surprise him when his *dad* did the same.

Felix accepted it eagerly, promising to come back again sometime completely unprompted and pulling truly radiant smiles from both of them.

He waved happily and floated back over to Hyunjin’s side, the taller boy catching his mom’s look of pure adoration following the blond out. He got it, he really, *really* did. Who would have thought that perpetual loner Hyunjin would not only make a friend but knock it out of the fucking park?

He opened the door for them, the blond following him out onto the

front porch. Thankfully, the rain had stopped, leaving a damp world at his doorstep. The impending darkness was bringing a bit of a chill and Hyunjin couldn't help but glance at Felix's bare legs.

"Are you going to be warm enough getting home?" He was sure that none of his pants would fit Felix but he was willing to offer *something*.

But the shorter man merely waved him off with a small smile. "I'll be fine. I actually don't live too far away."

"Oh." Interesting. I mean, it wasn't a *big* town and they went to the same school so it stood to reason but still. How close was he talking? Same street? A five minute walk? Ten? Twenty?

But he decided to not be a total stalker and didn't. Instead, he rocked back on his heels, unsure what he was supposed to do with his hands before deciding to be bold. He reached out, giving Felix's ear a soft scratch.

"Thanks for coming over,"

Felix grinned up at him, his head nuzzling into his palm readily this time. "You're just happy to have more brownies."

Hyunjin laughed, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, totally. That's it."

Felix giggled, taking a shy step forward. "Well, maybe I can bring more over sometime?"

Hyunjin's rogue fingers forgot about their mission to offer simple scratches and moved to his hair, threading curiously through the different texture of his blond locks lightly.

"How could I say no to brownies?"

Felix's smile brightened even more as he stumbled forward another small step. "Ah, so it's just about the brownies?"

"Aren't you just after my yarn?" Hyunjin teased.

"You caught me," Felix said before melting forward, looping his arms around Hyunjin's neck and pulling him close. The blond wobbled on tiptoes, trying to bury his nose in the taller man's neck and not quite reaching. So Hyunjin stabilized him, throwing his long arms around the blond's waist and bending at the knees enough so Felix could cuddle up.

He *felt* the sigh against the thin skin of his neck and it sent shivers down his spine.

Admittedly, he'd only hugged a handful of people in his life, but it felt a little groundbreaking when it was Felix.

He tightened his hold, wondering if that was allowed and was rewarded by the fluffy feel of Felix's tail wrapping around his waist in return.

"I'll see you on Monday?" Felix muttered, sounding weirdly unsure as if *anything* could keep Hyunjin from those halls. He could have a life threatening fever and he was pretty sure he would still beg his parents to let him attend classes.

"Of course," He said instead.

The blond hummed and then added. "And Jin? Can I have your locker combination?"

He should probably ask why but he didn't. "Sure."

Felix finally unhid his face and smiled up at Hyunjin. "Good. I think I know how I wanna decorate your locker but I want it to be a surprise."

Hyunjin smiled back at him before regretfully letting him go so he could retrieve a pen from the never signed guest book near the front door.

"Here, gimme your hand." He said as if the very words didn't make his heart trip all over itself.

He carefully wrote his locker combination on Felix's palm before curling his fingers over it protectively. "Keep it safe." He said needlessly. After all, the blond was already examining it, his little lips moving over and over in repeat, like he was trying to memorize it just in case.

"Thanks, Jin Jin!" He said brightly, lunging forward one more time to wrap him in a tight squeeze before bounding down the steps. He twisted back around, walking backwards for a few steps to wave again before finally disappearing down the sidewalk.

Hyunjin stood in the cool air for much longer than was necessary, listening to the pounding of his heart and trying to memorize the way

his body tingled against Felix when he hugged him.

He waited until he could hardly feel his toes through his thin socks and sighed, letting his breath cloud out in front of him ever so lightly. He hoped the blond got home before he got too cold. He should have asked for his number, asked him to text when he made it home safely.

But it was a sleepy town and Felix had told him he didn't live too far (whatever that meant) so he sighed one more time and made his way back inside.

He decided to just bite the bullet and went to the kitchen.

"Oh my *god,* Hyunjin! He's precious!"

He'd known it was coming. After all, he'd *finally,* after eighteen long years, brought a friend home for dinner. It was front page news worthy to his parents.

He hummed an affirmative noise and started filling the kettle. "Any one else want tea?" He asked, determined to at least have something warm to drink while his mom proceeded to reenact the Spanish Inquisition, albeit with much less religious motives.

"So how exactly did you meet? Do you share any classes or is he one of those boys you said you sat with at lunch?"

Hyunjin took a deep breath, beating back his embarrassment and trying to remember that his mom had every reason to be excited. After all, he had a feeling she'd been waiting for this moment even more than he had. "He's in my calc class and study hall. And also lunch, yeah."

His mom had her hands clasped tightly in front of her chest, looking over the fucking moon but it was his dad who spoke next.

"He's very sweet. And very polite. Seems like a good kid." He nodded with an easy smile before ducking his head a little. "I hope I didn't bore him too much with my rambling on about my job and what not."

Hyunjin couldn't help but smile softly at his dad. He'd gotten his bashfulness from his dad all the way. "Don't worry dad. If he said he didn't mind, he didn't."

His dad nodded, looking a little relieved to hear it.

The kettle started to whistle faintly and Hyunjin went to pour tea. His mom had been too distracted by her excitement to answer his earlier question so he went ahead and poured three cups, placing a tea sachet in each to steep.

He carried them carefully over to the table and sat down, ready to endure whatever embarrassing questions his mother had.

But he was a little caught off guard when his mom *didn't* just continue foaming at the mouth. Instead, she gratefully accepted the tea, letting the soothing warm from the cup radiate through her hands and calm her. When she glanced back up, her smile was gentle and genuine.

"Did you two have fun today?"

Hyunjin nodded, blowing the steam from his tea and knowing it was too hot to try to buy time with a sip yet. "Yeah," He muttered before sighing deeply. Because truly? How was he going to even *begin* to process this if he didn't vent it to his parents?

"He wanted to bring me brownies as a thank you for taking his homework to him when he was sick." He watched his mom's eyebrows raise but ignored it. "I guess he got our address from Changbin."

"One of the boys you were running with?" His mom clarified.

He nodded and continued. "So he just…showed up. Wearing his rain boots and frog hat." He had to bite his lip to keep his besotted smile to himself but it didn't stop the blush from overtaking his face. It was probably pointless to try to hide his crush. He *knew* his parents could probably already tell.

"And he asked if I wanted some company and just, I don't know. We just talked. And he helped me with the bike a little bit."

"Oh?" His dad asked, interest piqued. "A fellow mechanic?"

Hyunjin really, truly appreciated that his father wasn't one to judge based on looks but the idea was ridiculous. "Hardly. But he has little hands that are great for reaching tight spaces." He said with a chuckle.

His dad smiled and nodded, taking it in stride.

Hyunjin finally took a sip of tea, not sure what else to say. But eventually, the decision was made for him when his mom said quietly.

“So, he’s a hybrid.”

Hyunjin nodded needlessly. The ears and tail pretty much answered that question but he looked up, eyes moving from his mom to his dad and back again.

“Is…i-is that okay?”

“Oh, honey of *course* it’s okay! Don’t be silly!” His mom rushed to assure him. “I just hope we didn’t do anything to make him uncomfortable. I don’t know much about hybrids, to be honest. So I’m not sure what’s proper or polite or…” She trailed off with a shrug.

The brunette nodded in sympathy. It was odd to feel almost *wiser* than his parents on anything. “You did great. From what I can tell, he doesn’t really seem to mind being asked about it.”

Every time he’d stuttered out some nervous question that came even close to his hybrid nature, Felix had answered with careful consideration or near indifference. So far, nothing had offended him or made him feel uncomfortable about it.

“Oh! There is one thing!” He suddenly remembered. “It's nothing you *did,* it's just…Felix doesn't like water. Ya know, part of the whole kitten thing.”

His mom nodded slowly, looking a little confused as to why it was coming up before realization dawned. “So *that's* why you offered to wash the dishes.”

He nodded, fiddling with the handle on his mug. “Felix just…he wanted to make a good impression. And he wanted to help.”

“Such a sweet boy,” his mom cooed and Hyunjin couldn't stop himself from nodding in agreement.

“Well he is welcome here *any* time. Brownies or not.”

Hyunjin smiled. He was pretty sure he could bring home a convicted murderer and as long as he she said they were his friend, his parents would be overjoyed. They were just happy to see him interacting with other people his age.

“I'll uh, I'll have to invite him over again sometime.” Hyunjin said, feeling a little lightheaded at the idea of opening his door and finding Felix all smiley on his doorstep.

“Please do, Hyunnie. It was nice to see you like that.”

“Like what?” he asked, puzzled.

“Happy. Engaged. I don't know, you're…you're sweet with him.”

Hyunjin ducked his head and tried to hide behind a sassy quip.

“Aren't I always sweet?”

His mom smiled but rolled her eyes all the same.

“Yes but you're *extra* sweet with him.”

Hyunjin's cheeks were on fire. He wanted to deny it but he knew he was completely incapable of doing so. And really, was it such a bad thing to be accused of being sweet to the one you loved?

“Yeah…maybe.” He admitted.

His mom hooted, absolutely *delighted* by the admission. Even his dad was chuckling, enduring the excited punches his mom was slamming into his shoulder with nary a wince.

Hyunjin shyly and quietly answered her leading questions that yes, Felix had looked super cute in his frog hat and yes, he was a very talented baker and yes, he would really, *really* like to have him over for dinner again sometime.

He imagined the privilege of holding his hand secretly under the table while his fluffy tail tried to wrap around his ankle but quickly banished the thought.

He faked a yawn, claiming all his work in the garage had tuckered him out and drained the last dredges of his tea.

He escaped upstairs to his previously full of life room. He saw the comforter, wrinkled and rumpled from their play and whimpered pitifully. He walked over to his desk and unearthed his diary, heart bleeding onto the page.

*****

Dear diary,

Today was the day my parents met my future husband. They don't know it and neither does my groom but it's true. And one day, when we're super old and sitting side by side, hand in hand at our beach front retirement home, I'll tell him all about how I'd known from the very beginning that he was the one and he'll probably laugh at me and tease me but it'll be okay because maybe he'll find it cute.

Or creepy.

Perhaps my beach front retirement home is actually a penitentiary for crazy stalkers and loonies who fantasize about marrying a boy they've known for like 2 weeks. But how can I not?? He brought us brownies!! *And helped with my bike even though it ruined his nails! And he was so sweet to my parents (who fucking LOVED HIM thank you very much) and he offered to wash the dishes even though he hates water! Who does that?! Felix. That's who.*

And he saw my room. And instead of thinking it was weird to plaster my walls with my work, or that it was gross that I wash out old jam jars to put flowers in, he said it was beautiful and hugged me.

I want to hug him again.

I want to hug him and not let go for a long, long time.

OH AND THE YARN, HOLY SHIT THE YARN OH MY GOOOODDDDDDD!!!!!! HE'S THE CUTEST KITTEN THAT'S EVER EXISTED AND HOW COULD HE POSSIBLY THINK THAT ANYONE WOULDN'T FIND IT FUCKING PRECIOUS?!?! I would kill to see it again. Not like a person but like…an ant or bug or scary spider or something.

God, he just left and I miss him already.

*****

Hyunjin groaned and closed the beat up cover of his diary, storing it away carefully in the bottom drawer once again.

He quickly changed out of his dirty clothes, knowing he still needed a

proper shower to remove all the dirty and grime from himself but he just needed a moment to process. So he flopped back on his bed, his brain telling him the sheets were still warm from Felix even though that was impossible.

But when he took a deep breath in, he groaned on the exhale because that smell of peaches was *not* impossible and were very much lingering in his sheets.

He bathed in it torturously before finally hauling his body to the shower.

*****

Sunday had been a lot like Saturday minus a blond hybrid showing up at his garage door with baked goods and the ability to twist his stomach into knots.

However he'd spent most of the day fiddling with the bike only to realize *after* the auto parts store closed that he was missing an essential tool to tighten the chain.

So when Monday rolled around, dreary and gray, he packed a small umbrella deep in his backpack,beside his science book and left his house early to walk to school. It wasn't too terribly cold but the ever present rumble behind the clouds had him hunching his shoulders and walking faster.

He made it just in time, the sky opening up just after he crossed the threshold. Hyunjin wasn't one to think he had very good luck but today, it had been on his side.

He sighed, hiking his heavy backpack further up his shoulder, he made his way down the hallway. His beat up converse didn't have the same satisfying smack to the tile floors as his riding boots but people still parted in front of him.

He rounded the corner to find Felix trying *exceedingly* hard to be *very* casual as he leaned against Hyunjin's locker. However, he was sporting a face splitting smile and his tail was whipping excitedly back and forth so any illusion of chill was utterly shattered.

“Jinnie!” He yelped, the moment he came into view. He pushed off the bank of lockers, damn near skipping to his side and grabbing his hand in his own like it was easy as pie.

Hyunjin choked on his own breath but the blond didn’t notice as he began to excitedly *drag* the taller boy towards his locker.

“Hyunnie! Your bag looks so heavy! You should really open your locker and put some stuff away, okay? Please?”

The brunette laughed, sliding his bag down his shoulder and looking down to the excited blond. “Lixie, I already know you decorated it.”

“I *knowwww,* but open it, okay? I want to see your reaction!”

He was so excited and it was contagious. Hyunjin couldn’t help but nod and turn to his locker, twisting the lock as Felix clapped joyously at his side.

He popped the locker open and swung it open only to have the air stolen from his lungs.

“I sort of based it on your room!” Felix said excitedly, bouncing on his toes to point out each little detail. “Okay so I added some pictures of flowers and I even painted one, look! I know it’s not as good as yours but I tried really hard, okay? So go easy on me. Oh! And this rose! Not only does it smell nice but when they dry out they still look really cool!”

Hyunjin gently pet one of the blood red petals, wondering if Felix thought of the *romance* behind such a gesture. Probably not but Hyunjin did.

It was taped up against the inside of the locker door, seamlessly blending in with the beautiful collage Felix had built behind it. Flowers from old photographs, flowers from magazines. Flowers hand drawn with pencil, a shaky flower in cheap watercolors. All different kinds creating the most beautiful meadow right in his locker.

“I also got you a couple of magnets. So there’s a little uh…what’s it called? The paint thing?”

“A palette,” Hyunjin answered, finger drifting to the chunky magnet.

“Yeah! A palette! And I got you a motorcycle one too because you obviously really love your bike too.”

He nodded, oddly touched to see both of these magnets sitting side by side. It was like both sides of his coin were finally meeting. Arranged next to each other by someone who truly saw him.

His heart melted a little before he noticed something.

“Where’s the picture of you?” He searched through the collage, wondering if it had disappeared within but the blond was shrugging.

“It didn’t really go so I took it down.”

But Hyunjin couldn't have that. He *cherished* that undeserved photo. “You can’t just take my picture. It was a gift.” He said, giving Felix the tiniest, most unsure pout ever.

The blond’s eyes widened, surprised by the tactic before smiling slyly back. “Oh? You want to ruin all my hard work by adding a grainy school photo to the mix?”

“It wouldn’t ruin it.” Hyunjin immediately defended. It would be his focal point. “But yes. And the flower magnet too please.”

Felix’s sly smile bloomed into something a bit more goofy as he batted his eyes and nodded. He crouched down to open his own locker, having to dig around a little before popping back up with the slightly bent photo and offensively bright magnet.

It really didn’t go with the motif he’d crafted but it was still Hyunjin’s favorite part.

“There.” He said, taking a small step back to survey the thing as a whole. “*Now* it’s perfect.”

Felix giggled madly, inching closer to stand shoulder to shoulder with Hyunjin, grinning at his handiwork and back up at the brunette over and over. His tail reached out, tentatively wrapping around Hyunjin like it wanted to pull him closer.

“Hey, man!”

Hyunjin’s head flew to the side to find Chan walking over, smile wide and open. His eyes seemed to spy the way Felix’s tail was drifting closer to Hyunjin before he glanced up and caught sight of Hyunjin’s locker.

“Damn, look at that!”

“Channie! Hyunnie let me decorate his locker! Isn’t it great?” Felix was fucking *vibrating* with excitement.

Chan’s eyes surveyed the mess of flowers. He took in the magnets and all the little details that felt oddly personal for Hyunjin to have hanging out in the school hallways. He braced himself for questions. He braced himself for the furrowed brows and confused looks.

But all Chan said was, “So are you into art?”

Hyunjin said yes but *Felix* said, “Oh my god Chan, he’s *incredible!* He can draw *anything!* Look! He did my nails on Saturday! Aren’t they perfect?”

He held his nails up for Chan to inspect.

“On Saturday, huh?” Chan said quietly with a smirk. He took hold of Felix’s fingertips, angling them this way and that to take it all in, an impressed raise of the brow following.

“Shit, Hyunjin. These are incredible.”

“T-thanks,” He swallowed thickly, trying to calm his heart. It felt good to get praised for things he liked to do but he was woefully out of practice.

“Does this mean you could help Jeongin with art history? I don’t think he’s going to make it otherwise.” Chan laughed, the tightness in his eyes betraying the fact that he honestly was a little worried.

“S-sure! I’d love to actually.” Hyunjin said, feeling a calm wash over him.

And that was all.

No questions about *why* he liked girly things like flowers or how come he owned so much nail polish. There was no odd third degree that made him feel as though not conforming to a single stereotype made him bad or wrong.

It was simply an acknowledgement, a compliment and acceptance.

Why was everything so simple for these people when the very concept of who Hyunjin was had been so difficult for everyone else in his life?

Chan smiled and patted him on the shoulder as the warning bell rang.

“See you at lunch?” He asked both of them.

“Duh,” Felix said with a little hair flip that had Chan rolling his eyes fondly and waving as he left.

Hyunjin took one last look at his locker, almost sad that he needed to close it up.

“Thanks for this, Lix. You did great. It’s…it’s perfect.” Hyunjin said, still a little stunned. He closed the door softly, not wanting to jostle the rose from his beloved on the other side. And before he could talk himself out of it, he reached over and gave the tip of Felix’s ear a gentle, playful tug before soothing it over with his thumb.

The blond gazed up at him, his tail waving slowly while the rain pounded heavily on the roof. The halls were starting to clear as kids rushed to their first class but Hyunjin just wanted one more second with this man. Moments at their lockers and distant classes together weren’t enough. He wanted more.

“I’m glad you like it.” Felix said softly, his tail reaching out to brush along Hyunjin’s other hand. His fingers reached, stroking the soft fur and reveling in the way Felix edged closer, his tail not whipping away in fright.

He could have stayed like this forever. But the final bell rang and he was officially late. So he peeled his hands away, his nerves begging him to stay and smiled.

“See you in calc.” He said. It wasn’t a question this time.

Chapter End Notes

> So...kitten time. It's a thing ALSO, the next time I post, it will literally be right after I see SKZ I'M GOING TO EXPLODE (but don't worry, I'll try to post before I die)

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> Hello everyone! I am FRESH out of Gov Ball Pit Viewing! I am exhausted and sore and my voice is gone but oh my God, I am so happy right now 😭😭😭 So I'll keep the note brief and let us get into the chapter so I can sleep for the next 8-10 business days. LET'S GO!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“If we let *f(x)* equal *c*, then *f(x + h)* is also *c*, so the numerator becomes zero, and therefore the limit evaluates to zero,”

Hyunjin blinked slowly, as if he could capture the excessive mess of formulas on the whiteboard this way and commit them to memory. But at his point, the only thing getting committed was *him* because this class was driving him insane.

He helplessly watched as his professor circled a few factors with his laser pointer, leaning back in his chair like everything he was saying was common sense.

He looked down to his sad little notebook with its tragically blank page. It had the days date at the top because he had truly started with the best intentions but he’d gotten lost so *fast* and eventually just started copying some of the stuff from the board and writing question marks around it.

Thank *god* for Minho or he’d be in serious trouble.

As so often happened, he found his interest pulled from the middle aged teacher droning on about numerators and drawn across the room to a small blond. Typically, he was hunched over his notebook, nose shoved close to the page and sparkly gel pen in a *death grip* like taking these notes would finally bring world peace. He took this shit *seriously,* even if he was only a B- student in math.

But that was something Hyunjin really liked about Felix. He didn’t need to be the *best,* but he still tried his hardest. He did his best at everything, okay with the fact that maybe it wouldn’t result in perfection.

But today, Felix wasn’t hunched over his page, scribbling furiously.

Instead, he was hunched low, pen poised to write but his eyes were sliding across the board with a furrowed brow between. He seemed almost concerned. Or perhaps he was just as confused as Hyunjin was.

But then he noticed a little perk to the blond's ears. His spine straightened ever so slightly, just how it had when he'd been hunting the yarn in Hyunjin's room. He swore, even from across the room, he could see the way Felix's eyes widened.

Confused, Hyunjin looked back up towards the front of the room, wondering if he could find what had caught Felix's attention.

But when he looked back at the board, there was somehow three more lines to their current formula and he was hit with another wave of dread. He really hoped Minho didn't think he was *purposefully* slacking off. It wasn't like that at all. He really, *truly* was just this helpless.

At this point, he felt like it might even be impressive just how lost he was.

The bell mercifully rang, students darting off as if the math was going to chase them. Felix was one of them but he darted the other way, towards Hyunjin.

"Jin Jin! Come on, I'm hungry!"

The brunette laughed and hurriedly dumped his notebook in his bag, tossing it over his shoulder.

Perhaps it was the fact that Felix had been at his house and met his parents that made everything feel a little more *real.* A little less temporary. Almost as if these friendships could actually be something he could hold in his hands and keep.

So when he arrived at the lunch table, Felix yapping away at his elbow about a keychain he'd seen at the store last weekend that he was almost certain he could make on his own, Hyunjin decided to be a little brave. Well, brave for *him* at least. He sat across from Jeongin, Felix sitting next to him and tucking into his plate of pasta like he hadn't eaten in days.

"So uh…you're taking art history?" He asked, so proud when he didn't stutter.

Jeongin looked up, eyes wide like he was surprised Hyunjin had

initiated conversation. Which yeah, fair. “No, I’m *failing* art history,” he said with a grin, recovering quickly. “How’d you know?”

Hyunjin blushed, hoping he hadn't come of creepy. “O-oh! Chan mentioned it.”

“Channie!” Jeongin whined, throwing a truly pitiful pout down the table to the other boy. “Why’d you have to go and tell Hyunnie I'm failing art history? Now he's gonna think I'm lame!”

The brunette blinked, utterly shocked that Jeongin could be worried about *him* finding the other boy lame. That was *his* job.

“No, no, not at all!” He hurried to say. “I just, well I like art and I thought, if you needed or *wanted,* I could…help?”

He winced at his awkward landing but Felix was quick to swoop in and save him.

“Seriously Innie, Jin Jin is an *incredible* artist! He could totally help.”

“Really?” Jeongin asked, a little light to his eyes as he leaned forward, seemingly interested. “You're an artist?”

“Mhm!” Felix confirmed for him before smugly holding his hands out, nails on display. “Look! He did my nails.”

His wiggling fingers and proud little smirk had Hyunjin's stomach doing backflips.

“Wait, Hyunnie did your nails?” Jisung was up and out of his seat in seconds, nearly vaulting over the table instead of just walking around like a normal person. “I wanna see!”

Minho followed because of *course* he did and Binnie seemed to get just as caught up in the excitement, leaning across Seungmin to get a closer look and earning him a sharp shove back.

“Oh. My. *God!* Hyunjin, these are amazing!” Jisung cooed, holding Felix's finger tips like he was afraid he would shatter them.

“Seriously. These are impressive.” Minho agreed, his eyebrows raised in slight amazement that felt fucking ground breaking.

“Yah! I wanna see too!” Binnie cried, now climbing over a very upset Seungmin’s lap to get closer.

“*Daaaamm Hyunnie!”* He cried, giving a low whistle when he got a good look and finally retreated off Seungmin’s lap. “I want you to do my nails next!”

“No, no, no, *me next!”* Jisung cried, jumping up and down excitedly.

“Over my dead body. *I'm* next.” Seungmin said, finally breaking his silence and offering Hyunjin a little half smile.

Hyunjin felt his face heating up, a little overwhelmed by all the attention, no matter how positive it was.

But he felt a little squeeze to his bicep and looked down to find Felix glued to his side and *beaming* with pride. “Alright, alright calm down! I found him first!” He said, hand closing around his bicep again in something that he dreamed was a little possessive.

“False! *Chan* found him first!” Jeongin said, eyes watching the way Felix's fingers held onto Hyunjin.

“Well, technically, but -”

“-But what?” Minho challenged with a shit eating grin.

“...nothing.” Felix said softly, sounding almost nervous.

And suddenly Hyunjin remembered what Minho had told him. How Felix had simply *seen* Hyunjin on the first day and asked Chan about him. Had wanted to meet him. Wanted to *know* him.

He reached up a nervous hand before he could overthink and laid it gently over Felix's on his arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“It's first come, first serve. Lix is first but after that, I'd be happy to do all of your nails.”

He chanced a glance down and found the blond looking up at him with devastatingly wide eyes, soaked in some kind of fond affection.

But a blink layer and the blond's eyes flashed to the table, looking a little feral. “Do you know that that means?” He asked, expectation heavy on his voice.

“Sleep over!” Jisung cried at the same time Jeongin and Binnie did, devolving into a fit of giggles.

Hyunjin had never been to a sleep over before. It was hard to get

invited to things like that when you had no friends. But they wanted him to paint nails so…surely that counted as an invite, right?

Thankfully, he wasn't left to fester in his uncertainty for too long as Chan nudged him with his shoulder and smiled. “We usually try to do these a few times a semester. Do you like video games?”

Hyunjin shrugged. “Sure.”

“Yah! We can finally have even teams for Mario party!” He declared excitedly to the table.

Felix latched on even harder. “I call dibs!” He yelled immediately.

Chan chuckled, backing up with hands raised playfully, as if in surrender.

While the members of the table settled down and started trying to plan which weekend would be best and who's house, the blond finally let go of Hyunjin and leaned over the table to call out for Minho.

He nodded and walked over, empty tray in hand like he was ready to leave.

“Hey, can I join your next tutoring session with Hyunnie?”

Hyunjin frowned. Not because he minded; in fact it would be lovely to have his company. But because Felix had never needed help in calculus before.

Minho's face did a similar little scrunch. “Sure. Having trouble?” He asked, eyes searching.

The blond merely shrugged and toyed with a fry he'd stolen from Jeongin’s plate. “Just having trouble focusing in class. Must be tired or something.” Another shrug.

Hyunjin had to wonder if it had something to do with that change in posture earlier in class. The way the normally studious kitten had seemed distracted. Or potentially just the droning nature of the teacher's voice making him sleepy. He understood that. He *lived* that.

But Minho simply nodded and told him to join them after school tomorrow as the bell rang to signal the end of lunch.

Felix smiled at him and then pouted at the ceiling, evidently a little peeved by the bell.

Hyunjin chuckled under his breath and bravely nudged their shoulders together with a smile. “See you in study hall.”

Felix nodded eagerly and Hyunjin wondered if he'd ever be brave enough to grab Felix’s books from him and boldly walk him to his next class. Today wasn't that day but if he kept pushing, just a little bit at a time, maybe one day he could.

*****

The rain still hadn’t let up by the time Hyunjin said goodbye to Felix at the end of study hall. It was a shitty day to be walking home but he was endlessly grateful for the umbrella his mom had forced in his backpack before letting him leave. He’d need to thank her for that later.

Felix had flitted off after class, probably to the gym to see if they’d be having cheer practice indoors today. He had mentioned that when it got *really* cold they would move it to the gym sometimes so he figured the same would be true for other inclimate weather.

Hyunjin stopped at his locker, dreading the heavy weight of all his textbooks at once. It was a cruel little reunion they had every afternoon, one that made Hyunjin’s spine scream for mercy.

But the blow of it was lessened when he popped his locker open and a little note came fluttering out. He smiled, already knowing who it must be from. He’d been a little sad, thinking now that his locker was dressed to the nines, he wouldn’t be receiving these.

He caught it before it fell to the cold tile floor. This time, the stationary was a pale blue and in the shape of a fat raindrop. Did Felix coordinate his stationary each day? God, something about that was incredibly cute if it was true.

He unfolded it carefully to see Felix’s bubbly handwriting in the center.

Jinnie!

HI!

Xoxo, Lixie

He chuckled, flipping it over to make sure he hadn't missed anything but sure enough, it was blank on the other side. Just a note to say hello. Just a note because he'd been standing at his locker and thinking about Hyunjin.

It was clear to probably everyone that Felix was sweet as pie. But he wondered how many people really *thought* about his sweetness. How careful and special it was. If he cared, it was a verb, not a noun. He showed it in little ways, like silly notes and little shoulder nudges. The way his tail tried to reach Hyunjin without the blond's permission.

He clung to those he liked and never once apologized for it and Hyunjin really loved that about him.

He bit his lip, feeling incomparably soft inside as he ripped a corner off a page in his notebook and scribbled back a hello. Maybe he should invest in some cute stationary specifically for these little notes.

He slid it through the air vents on the blond's locker before closing his own and hoisting his bag up onto his shoulders. He grimaced a little at the weight but started walking toward the entrance of the school, umbrella in hand.

He pushed through those heavy doors, cool air washing over him and pulling a little shiver from him. The air *smelled* like rain, the parking lot covered in shimmering puddles that rippled with the still falling rain.

He stood off to the side, watching the rain fall for a moment, wondering how he could learn to capture that in a painting. The endless motion of it. The fresh smell of it that reeked of new growth, even in a season of decay.

The school had a pretty large overhang, protecting the immediate front of the school from the elements. He watched as fellow students gathered under it, chatting and making plans before squealing and running out into the rain, backpacks held over heads to shield from the rain as they bolted for cars or buses.

He stood for a few minutes himself, enjoying the fresh air before his

eyes found a familiar figure, standing on the far edge of the school, toeing the line between the dry, protected pavement and the shiny, wet cement on the other side.

“Lix?” He called, making his way over to the other boy. He wasn’t sure why he asked; no one else had a big fluffy tail, poofed up and evidently unhappy about the weather.

The blond jumped a little, caught off guard. He glanced over his shoulder and offered a slightly sickly smile. “Oh, hey Jin Jin,” he didn't sound as chipper as he usually did.

“Aren't you supposed to be in cheer practice right now?” He asked, brow furrowed.

But the blond shrugged, fists gripping the straps of his backpack. “Practice was cancelled; the basketball team has the gym booked and obviously we can't practice outside because of, well, you know.” He said, nodding toward the rain beside him.

Hyunjin nodded, brow still furrowed in confusion over the blond's sullen mood before he noticed the way the blond was scuffing the edge of his boot gently on the pavement, flicking his big brown eyes towards the rain clouds like he was begging them to stop.

And then it hit him.

“Oh my god, your umbrella is still in my garage, isn't it?”

Hyunjin suddenly saw it in his mind, sitting on the cool concrete, left to dry and completely forgotten. He'd seen it on Sunday when working on his bike and he'd thought to himself that he should take it to school on Monday but he's completely forgotten.

Felix chuckled a little awkwardly. “Yup,” he said, popping the p merrily even as his lips scrunched to the side and he looked down to his feet.

He wondered if he felt trapped here. The rain, blocking him in and those insecurities about himself keeping him from asking for help.

“Let me walk you home.” Hyunjin said, heart thundering in his chest. He raised his umbrella, pushing the button to snap it open. “We can share.”

“Jin,” Felix said, eyes wide and hopeful. “You don't have to-”

“You said you don't live far, right?”

He took a step forward, including the blond under the radius of his umbrella.

Felix nodded.

“Then it's really no trouble.” He assured. “Plus, I can't just *leave* you here.”

Those words tasted true on his tongue. In so many ways. His least favorite part of every day was leaving Felix behind. It was walking out of study hall with some weak little wave and a desperation for the next day to start already.

Was he pitiful? Yes. Completely. Did he care? No. Not in the slightest. Especially when Felix blinked up at him and slowly smiled, taking his own step closer and huddling into Hyunjin's side.

“I mean…if you insist,” he said with a giggle.

The parking lot had cleared out pretty quickly, most students so incredibly done with Monday as soon as the bell released them. So stepping out from under the awning nearly felt like stepping out into a barren world. Not in a bad way, but in a peaceful way.

It was a place where it was only him, the rain and Felix. And Felix was yelping, clinging to his side, trying to stay dry. His tail was wrapped around Hyunjin desperately, trying to stay as close as possible. His arms were thrown around Hyunjin's waist, holding tight and nearly tangling their feet as they tried to walk.

He heard the smallest whimper next to him, wondering how on *earth* Felix made it through a shower if *this* was the reaction he had to getting rained on.

But that didn't matter. What mattered right now was how close Felix was and how every little piece of him was begging Hyunjin to keep him safe.

He wrapped his free arm around the blond's shoulders, holding it gently in the palm of his hand and rubbing what he hoped were soothing circles into it. “Don't worry, Lix. Just stay close, okay?”

“O-okay.” He said, shrinking into Hyunjin's side even more.

Hyunjin kept the umbrella raised high, his right shoulder getting drizzled on as he angled it further over Felix. He didn't mind getting a little wet, especially if it was for a noble cause like this.

The blond's feet seemed unsteady as they fumbled alongside Hyunjin's clumsily. He swore he could feel a little tremble shivering through the blond's shoulders.

“Are you cold?”

It could have easily been his fear but there was no harm in asking.

Felix shrugged which was enough for Hyunjin to pass the handle of the umbrella to him.

The blond took it but blinked at Hyunjin, confused until the taller boy started to shrug his worn leather jacket off.

“Oh! Jin Jin, no you don't have to do that! I'll be fine, it's not that far of a walk.”

But Hyunjin shook his head, draping the heavy leather over Felix's shoulders and nearly having the breath punched out of his lungs because *holy shit,* Felix was wearing his jacket.

It looked so out of place over his pink and red checkered baby tee and baggy light wash denim. But *damn,* it looked good.

He swallowed thickly and turned his eyes away, cheeks burning. He merely threw his arm back over Felix’s shoulders, pretending he was completely unaffected and dragging the blond along with him, determined to keep him in his jacket long enough to get the smell of peaches on it.

Felix sighed, relenting quickly and settling his arms back around Hyunjin's waist, staying glued to his side and as far away from the rain as possible.

He wondered if they looked like a couple. Like two young love birds. Like he escorted this angel home every day, raining or not.

“So,” Felix said, low voice nearly washed away with the rain,”how was your day?”

Hyunjin felt this domestic, lived in part of him hum in satisfaction. “It was pretty good. Besides calculus.” He added automatically.

The blond groaned. “God, was it just me or was the lecture like, *way* more boring than usual.”

“Yeah, I noticed you seemed to be having trouble paying attention.”

The blond looked up at him, a playful smile tugging at his lips as his brows raised. “Oh? You noticed me?”

Hyunjin so badly wanted to scoff. Of *course* he noticed Felix. It was impossible not to.

But he wasn't sure how to say that without completely exposing his pathetic, needy side so he shrugged, looking straight ahead.

“I suppose you sort of pull focus.”

Felix giggled gleefully, his arms tightening around Hyunjin like a reward. “Oh I'm *flattered* to win your attention over Mr. Buo.”

Mr. Buo had an unfortunate habit of eating seaweed between classes and not checking his teeth before lecture.

“How's the tutoring with Minnie going, by the way? Is it helping?” Felix asked.

“Definitely. I just feel like the teacher moves to fast for me to really keep up, ya know? But Minnie is really patient, slowly breaking down each step for me so I can understand each before we move on.”

“Hmm, patient, you say?” Felix's voice was lightly contemplative before he finished his pondering and looked up at Hyunjin with something like pride in his eyes. “Minnie must like you then.”

Hyunjin felt a gentle pink settle across his cheeks and decided he'd blame it on the slight chill in the air if anyone asked.

His knee jerk reaction was to deny it but honestly? If Felix said it then it was probably pretty likely. It meant that perhaps Hyunjin wasn't insane for thinking someone like Minho could potentially not hate him. Perhaps…even *tolerate* him.

Heady stuff.

“He doesn't seem to *hate* me, so that's good.” Hyunjin said, huffing out a little stunned laugh.

“Of course he doesn't! You're *impossible* to hate!” Felix said adamantly.

“*Everyone* likes you. They all were skeptical when I first-” the blond's words halted suddenly. Hyunjin glanced down to find Felix with wide eyes, peaking up at him nervously while he gnawed on his bottom lip. “I-I mean…”

But Hyunjin knew what he meant. Because Minho had told him as much. That Felix had simply seen him and wanted to know him. Against all odds and against all logic, this kitten had seen *him* and where everyone in the past had shied away, keeping their distance and convinced he'd somehow ruin their permanent record, Felix had decided to pull him closer. He'd enlisted Chan as reinforcements to make sure they could meet.

He squeezed Felix's shoulder before raising his hand and burying his fingers lightly in the soft fur at the base of his ears. He offered blunt nailed scratches as he said, “Minho told me. That you…wanted to know me?”

Felix groaned but still nudged his ear more snuggly into the fit of his hand. “God, so embarrassing.”

Hyunjin laughed breathily, knowing what he meant but disagreeing wholeheartedly. Instead, he asked the question he's wanted to know the answer to since he'd learned this. “I just don't understand *why.”*

“Why what?”

“Why you'd want to know *me*?”

There were a few beats of silence, only broken by their soggy steps on the rain soaked pavement and the uneven pitter patter of rain on the umbrella overhead. The soft fur between Hyunjin's searching fingers was soothing in a way.

“I don't really know, honestly.” Felix finally said honestly.

Hyunjin glanced down at the blond to find him looking ahead into their dreary path. The last of the green of summer looked vibrant and lush in the rain, stunning in its liveliness right before death.

“I can't explain it.” Felix continued, voice a lazy river pulling Hyunjin along. “I saw you ride into the parking lot. And at first, it was just your bike that caught my attention; I don't think anyone else rides a bike to school so that was new and different. But I guess…I dunno, I guess I expected you to light up a cigarette or something stereotypical like that.“

The blond sighed, sounding almost disappointed in himself at this assumption but Hyunjin couldn't help but laugh a little.

“No way. Cigarette smoke aggravates my asthma.”

The shorter boy barked out a laugh before beaming up at the brunette. “Of course it does,” he said, like the never ending saga of Hyunjin being way lamer than he looked was something he was fond of.

“But you didn't.” Felix said, getting back on track, eyes forward again. “You just…got off your bike and walked inside like everyone else and I just…I don't know. You even looked a little nervous.”

“I was.” Hyunjin admitted easily. “First days at a new school are always tough.”

The blond hummed in sympathy and tightened his grip on Hyunjin's waist. “I bet.”

“But having a place to sit at lunch? That was…”

Life changing? A fucking first? Terrifying and exciting in equal measures?

“... unexpected.”

To say the absolute least.

“But it really helped.” He added. “So…I'm glad. That you wanted to know me. I uh…I would have wanted to know you too.”

He hoped Felix was still looking forward so he didn't see the blush on his cheeks. He pet the soft little tufts at the top of Felix's ear carefully to distract himself.

“Yeah?” Felix asked quietly.

“Yeah.”

A beat of silence and then, “Because I'm so cute?”

Hyunjin rolled his head back, unable to hold in his laugh as the blond shook with his own laughter under his arm.

“Yeah, totally. No other reason.” Hyunjin joked, his heart thudding aggressively in his chest at his admission.

Felix giggled, his little fingers digging into Hyunjin's side lightly. He didn't have to look to *know* the blond was beaming. He could fucking *feel* his ears twitch with pleasure and his tail flicker excitedly around him.

The shorter boy gently guided them to the left, finally turning onto a heavily treed street where the rain got caught in the canopy, sometimes pulling them loose in their frantic spill toward the ground.

“This is me,” Felix said, only two houses in. There, behind a lush green garden, overrun by vines and tangled flowers, just beginning to wilt, was a cozy brick home.

Hyunjin felt a warmth from it, wondering if it came from Felix or if he came from a home that had imbued its warmth on him. Which direction did it go? Where did this warmth originate from?

“Would you wanna come in?”

Hyunjin tore his eyes from that warm home to look down at Felix, ears perked and curious. And god, yes. He wanted to go in and see whatever bejeweled mess was most likely the blond’s bedroom. He wanted Felix to offer him a cup of warm tea and he wanted to sit at the table and sip it and keep talking about nothing at all.

But what if Felix’s parents were home? What if he walked in and they saw their darling little boy draped in Hyunjin’s beat up leather jacket? What if they took one look at his ripped jeans and the safety pins in his ears and decided they hated him?

He wouldn't blame them, he supposed. He would never blame someone for trying to protect Felix, even if he wanted to be the thing that protected him at all costs.

So he finally retrieved his arm, sliding it sadly off of the blond’s shoulder to rub at the back of his neck. “I uh, I should probably get home. I don’t want my parents to worry.”

Felix nodded easily. “Of course.”

Hyunjin started to lead him up the front walk, towards the safety of his front porch. Felix held onto him until the last step, until it was safe for him to step out from under the umbrella and under the roof of his own home. The blond turned, facing Hyunjin with big eyes that said so many kind things. Thank you was implied but he still said it anyways.

“Thank you, Jin Jin. You saved me.” He smiled and added, “Again.”

“Again?”

“First the boring bakesale and Ho-Jin. And now this? How will I ever repay you?”

But Hyunjin smiled back shyly and shook his head. “There’s no need.”

The smaller man stared back at him with those soft eyes, looking like he wanted to move forward. But Hyunjin stood on the top step, the sky open above him and leaking.

He took another careful step back, preparing to retreat and leave Felix to his evening. Maybe next time, he’d pack a tie. Just in case. So if Felix asked, he could stay and look like a good influence. Someone Felix’s parents might let stay for dinner.

Would it be too much to ask Chan to write him a letter of recommendation?

But one more step back, feet back on the little brick walkway and he felt a little hand spring out, grasping his wrist and hissing as the raindrops hit.

But he didn’t let go.

“Jin?”

The taller man blinked dumbly before scrambling back up the steps, letting Felix remove his hand from the chilly rain and wondering why on earth he’d do something like that willingly. But he didn’t have to wonder very long as Felix’s hand disappeared behind his back for a moment and reappeared with a phone in it and a nervously bitten bottom lip.

“Can I maybe have your number?”

“My…number?”

Felix nodded, giving him a sweet smile he really didn’t deserve after being this dumb. “Yeah. Like, ya know, your phone number?”

Could the blond tell that Hyunjin was far too delicate for things like this? Could he tell that these words stopped his heart a little bit and made it hard to breath and think and even *remember* his fucking number?

“S-sure.”

He accepted the unlocked phone with a blank contact page pull up and carefully entered his name and number. He tapped save and handed it back only to find Felix ferally grinning at his new contact and immediately tapping out a little message.

[Unknown Number] 3:04 PM

Hi Jin Jin!! Guess who?? 🫵💕

That fucking emoji nearly killed him.

But he played it cool by merely blushing to his roots and stuttering out a laugh that sort of sounded like he was having life threatening respiratory issues.

“There, now you have my number too!” The blond sounded positively delighted by this and Hyunjin offered the best smile he could, even if it was a little shaky. He pocketed his phone again and restarted his retreat.

This time he made it to the sidewalk before his phone vibrated again. He paused, pulling it out and convinced it was probably his mom checking in, wondering what was taking so long.

[Unknown Number] 3:06 PM

See you at school tomorrow??

Hyunjin looked up, a genuine little giggle peeling from his lips when he found Felix still standing on the front porch, rocking cutely on his heels and trying to hide his enormous smile behind his phone and failing.

He offered a thumbs up but Felix pouted and Hyunjin sighed, not annoyed in the slightest.

Hyunjin [3:06 PM]

Of course

It was bland compared to Felix's texts but this was new to him. He didn't exactly have long, drawn out conversations with his mom over text unless there was a new season of the bachelor airing.

He heard Felix's giggle and watched as the blond wiggled his fingers in his signature little wave before finally moving toward his front door and letting himself in.

Hyunjin stared as the front door closed, making sure Felix made it inside okay as if it wasn't more than five steps max before he turned to leave.

He made it back around the corner, having to cut across the next street to set him on his own path home. They really didn't live all that far. Twenty minutes max at a leisurely pace.

He was just turning onto his own street when his phone rumbled again in his pocket. He dug it out only to find that same unknown number glowing brightly with a notification on the lock screen.

Unknown Number [3:15 PM]

Is it tomorrow yet?

He stared at that text for a full minute, forgetting to walk until a car drove past him and introduced sound back into his world.

With shaky fingers, he finally saved the contact so he could look at the message in all it's glory.

Lixie💕 [3:15 PM]

Is it tomorrow yet?

*****

He *heard* the whispers the second he entered the school the next day.

Hyunjin was used to whispers; he'd been plagued with them his entire life. Honestly, to him there was no background noise more common than the student body rumbling about him.

But usually these whispers became hard glares and scared flinches as he passed in the hallway. On his first day at his last school, he'd watched some poor girl nearly faceplant into an open locker door in her haste to dodge around the corner and out of his path.

But today, these whispers and watchful eyes felt different. He saw eyes following him with curiosity and confusion but not the unwarranted fear he'd become so accustomed to.

Feeling a little unnerved, he rounded the corner only to find the answer to everyone's odd behavior.

It was a short little blond standing at his locker.

Wearing *his* jacket.

The one he'd let him borrow on the walk home yesterday. The old thing was swallowing him whole, the sleeves eating his hands and the shoulders struggling to stay on his slight frame. He was wearing yet another baby tee, this time a tight white one with a cute little cherry graphic paired with low rise jeans.

And *Hyunjin's* jacket.

Goddammit, he wasn't going to survive this man.

“Jinnie!” The blond cried excitedly. He rushed the few steps forward to close the gap between them, tossing his arms around Hyunjin's neck like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like they did this all the time and oh my god, if hugging Felix hello and goodbye became a *thing,* he would never doubt the existence of a god again.

“H-hey Lix,” he said, just barely remembering to return the hug before the blond was removing himself, stepping back and beaming up at him.

His arms ached to pull him right back in but he clenched his fingers

into tight fists and kept himself in check.

“Morning Jin Jin, how was your evening?”

So Hyunjin told him how nothing had happened; he'd done some homework, ate some dinner and stared at Felix's number in his contact list for a solid hour before forcing himself to put his phone away. He didn't tell him the last part but Felix still listened like he was offering top secret information he'd be quizzed on later.

And then Felix told him how he'd helped his mom make a fish stew but it hadn't turned out too good and now he was extra hungry and probably gonna die of starvation before lunch.

Hyunjin had smiled at his dramatics, unable to erase the besotted look from his face, he was sure. But Felix was just so *endearing.* He could listen to him talk about anything forever and be completely content with it.

The warning bell was getting ready to ring when Felix snapped his fingers, suddenly remembering something. “Oh! Your jacket! Thanks for letting me borrow it,” he started to shrug it off but Hyunjin couldn't help it. His hand shot out, pulling the garment back into his shoulder.

“Why don't you keep it for today?” It came out a little breathless. “I don't need it and, I mean…what if you get cold again?”

There was positivity no way Felix didn't see straight through his flimsy little excuse but he couldn't help the thrill that chased through him when Felix just nodded solidly back, biting back his smile and saying, “Oh, yeah. I suppose that's a good idea.”

Hyunjin tried to keep his own smile at bay but felt his lips twitch regardless.

They parted ways but Felix was still wearing it in calculus. He strutted into the cafeteria like it was a runway, Hyunjin's jacket fashionably falling off his shoulders. He accepted the raised eyebrows from Chan with a shrug because truly, he couldn't explain this.

In study hall, Felix pulled his desk against Hyunjin's and they huddled over their calculus homework, helplessly trying to gather their thoughts and write a list of questions for Minho before realizing their questions basically amounted to, “So how does one…math?”

And while the shame bowed Hyunjin's shoulders as they slumped into the library after the final bell, Felix held his head high, fingers playing with the cuff of the jacket merrily.

He loved that jacket on him.

He was about four seconds away from telling him to just keep it when Minho sat down at their table with a curt nod. He looked exhausted, scrubbing a hand down his face as he pulled out his calculator.

“You look like you're half dead.” Felix said casually, completely unaffected by the flat smile Minho gave him.

“Gee, thanks,” he said blandly.

But Felix just giggled, wiggling an eyebrow and leaning forward conspiratorially. “What's the matter? Jiji keep you up all night?”

Hyunjin nearly choked at Felix's bold quip but Minho, calm as ever, merely gazed solidly back. “Yeah actually, he did.”

The blond gasped, slamming back into his chair while his little hand gripped Hyunjin's knee under the table. *Hard.*

Normally, if would have stopped Hyunjin’s heart but his attention was stuck on the new development to his current favorite ship.

“Yah, not like that you weirdo,” Minho said with an eye roll and devious little smile. He knew *exactly* what he was doing.

Felix pouted, slouching forward again and whining, “But Minnie why *nooooot*?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Yongbok-ah.”

“Maybe you should put your mind *in* the gutter.” Felix muttered, still pouting heavily.

But predictably, Minho just rolled his eyes. “He couldn't find his lucky socks so I was at his house until almost 2 AM helping him look for them only to find them *in his sock drawer.”* His sigh should have sounded a lot angrier than it was. Instead, he sounded fond and besotted and *fuck,* Hyunjin couldn't help if when his own hand shot under the table to squeeze Felix's hand that still rested on his knee.

He shot a glance at the blond and was just *certain* that he had noticed it too. At least, that was how he interpreted him biting his lower lip

and flicking a glance in his direction.

“Why did he need his lucky socks?” Felix asked, acting nonchalant even as his hand flipped to grab hold of Hyunjin's.

“Spanish quiz.” Minho said before sighing. “But enough of that. What are we working on today?”

Hyunjin, using his free hand and starting to register the fact that Felix was *holding his fucking hand,* flipped his notebook open and pointed at his sad, confused notes from class.

Minho read through them quickly, somehow deriving some kind of meaning from it and humming.

“You too, Yongbok?” He asked, grabbing Hyunjin's book to start flipping to the right section.

“Huh?”

“Do you have questions about the same stuff or something else?”

“Oh, uh, same stuff.” Felix said before adding, "and also just like…all of it?”

Minho paused, looking up with narrowed eyes.

“Hey, don't look at me like that! I just couldn't pay attention and got lost! It happens!”

“Sure, just not usually to you,” Minho said, sounding skeptical.

Not sure what he should do, Hyunjin settled on giving Felix's fingers a little squeeze and hoping it helped. He wasn't sure if it did but Felix didn't let go and the lesson began, both of them secretly holding hands under the table for reasons Hyunjin couldn't understand.

But he wasn't going to mention it because for all he knew, this was the closest he would ever get to heaven. He intended to hold these delicate fingers until they were pried from his cold, dead hands.

Or an hour passed and Minho said it was time to go. Whichever came first.

Shockingly, it was the second one. Minho, after the *seventh* yawn in under ten minutes, finally called it quits, saying he'd be happy to tutor them tomorrow if needed.

But Hyunjin shook his head, feeling more confident after Minho's pointers, as always.

And Felix seemed to have figured it out almost immediately, half of his homework already completed. It was truly like he'd just missed a day of class and needed a quick run through.

“I hope you get some rest,” Hyunjin said softly, offering a light smile to a sleepy Minho.

Minho smiled back, barely more than a curve of the lips but it still made Hyunjin feel a little warm inside.

“Yeah Minnie, thanks for your help.” Felix said, his hand finally disengaging from Hyunjin's and ripping his heart out along with it. It was like watching the gates of heaven slam shut in your face.

Minho nodded, truly looking dead on his feet as he started to weave his way out of the library. Hyunjin hung back, waiting for Felix to finish packing up his jingly mess of a backpack. But the second the door shut behind Minho, Felix was flinging himself at Hyunjin, eyes feral with excitement as he gripped Hyunjin's shoulders viciously.

“He was at Jisung’s *house until 2 AM!”*

Confirmed: Felix had *also* noticed Minho's fond as fuck little smile.

“To look for *socks?* Why do I feel like Minho doesn't believe in something like luck, let alone dirty socks that Jisung has *decided* are lucky?”

Felix cackled loudly before getting a death glare from the librarian. They glanced at each other and giggled, hurriedly gathering their things and rushing out into the hallway.

Felix was bouncing on his toes, nearly skipping alongside Hyunjin. “He *doesn't*! I told him good luck once, for like a test or something and you know what he said? Luck is for losers without skill!”

Hyunjin couldn't help but laugh, seeing it so clearly in his head. “Oh okay but he's helping his “friend” find his lucky socks at midnight?”

“Exactly,” Felix said, a heavy sigh following. “I just wish they would date already.”

Hyunjin sighed alongside him, wondering how Felix had been

watching this for *years* and not physically forced them into a confined space to figure their shit out.

“You ever consider just handcuffing them together?” Hyunjin said, secretly only half joking.

And god bless Felix because the blond merely sighed again, replying with utter seriousness when he said, “Chan said it was borderline illegal and said I probably shouldn’t.”

Hyunjin’s lips twisted into a little grin, glad he wasn’t the only one who was a little intense when it came to things like romance.

They walked in companionable silence, stopping by their lockers to grab their last few items and so Felix could grab the grape flavored lip gloss he claimed he *needed.* Hyunjin did his absolute best not to focus on the fact that he now knew what Felix’s lips would taste like in this *exact* moment.

Hyunjin had finally closed his locker, certain he had everything he needed for homework tonight when he turned to find Felix shrugging out of his jacket.

“No, Lix-”

“Thanks for letting me wear this today, Jin Jin. I really appreciate it.” Felix held it out carefully, eyes soft like he truly was thankful for this little bit of kindness that had cost Hyunjin nothing but the tattered shreds of his sanity.

He wanted to tell him to keep it. Or to at least wear it home, urging him that it was too cold for him to walk home without it. But then he registered the bright red corduroy jacket Felix was gripping in his other hand.

So he’d *voluntarily* worn Hyunjin’s jacket all day? Even though he’d brought a well coordinated, fitted one of his own?

The brunette felt a blush rising to his cheeks, not entirely sure what he was supposed to do with this information besides melt a little bit inside and accept the offered jacket with something like gratitude blooming in his chest.

“Of course, Lix. Anytime.”

The blond bit his bottom lip, looking bashfully down at his sneakers.

“Yeah? Well I’ll have to keep that in mind then.”

He really, *desperately* hoped he would.

*****

Dear Diary,

Big news: Felix wore my jacket at school ALL DAY TODAY. To the point that people were fucking TALKING ABOUT IT. In the halls. Like they were whispering about it. I wonder what they were saying…

Probably wondering why the school’s resident angel is wearing that freak’s jacket.

Whatever. Felix wore it all day because he wanted to. I know this because at the end of the day, I saw that he’d actually brought his own and had kept it in his locker all day.

Oh but there’s more!!! So he was distracted in calculus and joined my tutoring session with Minho. Which was cool, except it was really hard to concentrate because Felix HELD MY HAND UNDER THE TABLE.

It started because Minho said something really love-struck about Jisung (shocking, I know (insert eyeroll here)). Okay well not like…romantic or anything but he told us he was so tired because he’d been at Jisung’s until 2 IN THE MORNING. So yeah, Felix and I might have freaked out a little. But we were really smooth about it, so Felix grabbed my hand under the table in excitement. But then he didn’t let go.

It’s like…both the jacket and the hand holding…he could have stopped at anytime if he wanted to. But he didn’t. And like, I don’t want to get my hopes up but what if that means…I don’t know. But it’s probably not a bad thing. I don’t think he secretly hates me, at least.

In fact, I think he might be my best friend at this point. I can’t really be sure because I’ve never had a regular friend before, let alone a best friend. But…I mean, if you get to choose? I choose Felix. I honestly can’t think of anyone else who gets me like he does.

Like yeah, he’s hands down the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen in my

entire life and I think I'll still say that even if I live to be 100 but it's more than just big, sparkly eyes and tiny little hands and those goddamn freckles I really want to see again. It's just him. Like, everything about him.

I know I'm kind of a mess around him but he also sort of makes me feel like a whole person. I don't know how to explain it but…I guess I just feel seen with him. Like he really sees me and doesn't think it's weird or bad. He just smiles up at me and makes me think that it'll all be okay.

Anyways.

He wore grape lipgloss today so I've decided that grape is my new favorite flavor.

Chapter End Notes

They have FINALLY exchanged numbers and I think Lixie is gonna have a lot of fun with this lol. I'll see you on Thursday!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> Hello hello and welcome back! I am finally (mostly) recovered from Gov Ball! Well...physically. Emotionally? I'll be trapped there for another 7-10 business years 😓 We have a bit of a shorter chapter today (she says, going off vibes alone and not even checking the word count) but it's sweet and fluffy so I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hyunjin's world had pulled a complete and total 180 in the last few weeks and it was all because of Felix and his friends.

If you had told him one year ago that he'd be surrounded by funny, intelligent, popular kids who continued to allow him to sit at their lunch table, he would have called you crazy. If you'd told him that he'd meet the love of his life and not only be allowed to talk to him but *have his fucking phone number,* he would have called bullshit. And if you'd told him that he'd be sitting at home on a Sunday night, eager for Monday morning to come, he would have laughed in your face.

But here he was, washing dishes after dinner and watching his phone *explode* with the group chat he'd been added to. It was actually vibrating so hard that he had to snap a glove off to catch his phone before it took a soapy plunge into the sink.

“My, my, what's going on?”

His mom had carefully packed up their leftovers and was stowing them in the fridge when she witnessed the catch of the century. Her eyes were fucking *sparkling* which happened every time she saw proof of the mysterious friends Hyunjin was still a little secretive about.

“Oh uh, Lixie added me to a group chat. They're trying to plan a sleep over?”

His mom's hands clapped together, held in front of her chest in utter delight. “Oh, how exciting! You know, you're welcome to invite them all over here if you want!”

“I don't know, mom. That sounds…stressful.”

He'd never hosted before and sort of assumed that he'd grow into the kind of adult who lived in a shoebox apartment, making pennies for his painting and eating ramen alone every night. Seriously, what did he know about entertaining guests?

“Plus, I think Chan already offered?”

He actually wasn't sure but it seemed pretty Chan coded. He was a natural leader, after all.

His mom pouted gently. He knew she wanted to meet everyone and it wasn't like he was ashamed of her or his dad. Far from it; he loved his family. He just truly didn't know what one was supposed to do with 7 guests. He would rather observe a sleepover first before jumping straight into hosting one.

“Well will you at least bring Lixie back over sometime? He's such a sweetheart.”

Hyunjin couldn't stop the little blush that attacked his cheeks. Both of his parents were incredibly sweet on the blond. Which made perfect sense and, in Hyunjin's mind, it would be illegal and immoral to *not* be enamoured by him. But ever since they'd met him, they'd been not so subtly dropping hints at wanting to see him again. Which Hyunjin wanted too. *Desperately.* He just couldn't quite figure out how to ask Felix to come over without sounding as needy as he was.

“I'll ask. He's just busy with cheer and stuff.” He was sure that was true, even if the blond had never complained about it himself.

His mom nodded in understanding, finally shutting the door on the fridge and releasing him from her questioning.

He finished up the dishes, cleaning out the sink before scooping up his finally silent phone and darting upstairs to catch up.

There were patterns he was starting to notice with the group chat. Like how Chan always had perfect punctuation and capitalization in his messages or how Minho's glare could be felt through the phone. He learned that Jisung loved to poke fun at everyone but ran to Minho anytime someone retaliated. And Felix was just here for the memes and cute stickers.

Binnie [5:23 PM]

Any update on this sleepover?

Seungmin [5:24 PM]

What sleepover?

Jeongin [5:24 PM]

We're having a sleepover??

Lixie 💕 [5:25]

Sleepover?? OMG YAY 😭 When? Where?

Channie's? What's the snack situation looking

like and I stg Binnie, do NOT say beef jerky □

Jisung [5:26 PM]

YOU GUYS ARE HAVING A SLEEPOVER

WITHOUT ME???

Jisung [5:26 PM]

MINNIEEEE 😭😭😭

Minho [5:27 PM]

I can hear him crying from next door.

Minho [5:27 PM]

One of you. Fix it.

Chan [5:27 PM]

WHAT SLEEPOVER??

Chan [5:28 PM]

I was unaware we were having a sleepover at

MY HOUSE

Jisung [5:29 PM]

Me too □□□

Binnie [5:30 PM]

Omfg I need new friends…

Binnie [5:31 PM]

Nothing is planned yet! You all were talking

about it at lunch! That's why I was asking!!

Jeongin [5:32 PM]

Oh

Jeongin [5:32 PM]

Yeah I'm free whenever

Seungmin [5:33 PM]

Same

Lixie [5:33 PM]

Me too

Jeongin [5:35 PM]

At Chan's?

Chan [5:35 PM]

I got to ask my parents but they'll probably be fine with it. Next weekend?

Minho [5:36 PM]

Works for me

Jisung [5:36 PM]

Am I invited this time??

Binnie [5:37 PM]

No Jisung, you're not

Minho [5:38 PM]

Goddammit, I can hear him crying again

Binnie [5:39 PM]

I WAS BEING SARCASTIC

Seungmin [5:40 PM]

How many times do I have to tell you that

sarcasm doesn't travel through text?!

The conversation devolved from there, Hyunjin honestly unable to process the rest when a separate text pinged on his phone. He switched threads to see a message from Felix.

Lixie [5:55 PM]

You'll be there, right Jin Jin?? Please say yes

pleeeaasseee

Hyunjin smiled, staring at those little emojis that couldn't hold a candle to the real thing. If Felix told him he needed help hiding a body while making that face, Hyunjin would go to jail for him, no questions asked.

Hyunjin [5:56 PM]

Yeah, I'll be there

It's not like he needed to check his plans or other social engagements first. As long as his grandparents weren't coming into town, he had no plans.

Lixie💕 [5:57 PM]

OMG YAY!!!

Hyunjin smiled at his phone before setting it aside. He sort of figured that would be it, the end of the conversation. But only a few minutes later, just as he'd leaned back in bed with his current poetry collection (Richard Siken), his phone buzzed again.

Lixie💕 [6:01 PM]

Whatcha doing? 😼

He glanced at his book in hand, debating about lying or saying nothing but immediately deciding that did him no good. He could only be seen by Felix if he opened the fucking black out curtains a little. Plus, he'd already seen Hyunjin's art plastered, flower infested room. It's not like he'd be surprised.

Hyunjin [6:02 PM]

Reading

Lixie💕 [6:02 PM]

Reading what? 😼

Hyunjin [6:03 PM]

Poetry. Richard Siken actually.

Lixie💕 [6:03 PM]

Ooo, how cultured of you 🪶

Lixie💕 [6:04 PM]

Are you liking it? Is it good?

Hyunjin realized he'd been holding his breath only when it all rushed out at once. Of *course* Felix would take it in stride. When did he not?

Hyunjin [6:07 PM]

Honestly? It's so good omg. His stuff feels raw

and accessible. Some poetry I honestly don't

understand but his feels relatable I guess?

Lixie💕 [6:08 PM]

What makes poetry good? I don't know

anything about it 🧐

Hyunjin smiled even bigger. He moved his book to his nightstand and hunkered down into his pillow a little. The warm glow of his lamp made him feel insulated in his conversation.

So he let himself ramble about how literature was completely subjective and how he personally *hated* some classics that critics loved but how he'd read books that had terrible reviews and adored them. He learned that Felix's favorite book was actually Red, White and Royal Blue but that he *told* everyone it was Wuthering Heights to seem classier. He also learned that he was sworn to secrecy on that.

They chatted, batting texts back and forth long enough for Hyunjin to feel a little relaxed. To feel that ever present smile on his face like it was never going to die. So when Felix mentioned he should probably

go help his mom with the laundry since she was the one who altered all his clothes for his tail, Hyunjin decided to throw it out there.

Hyunjin [6:44 PM]

Speaking of mom's, mine says hi

Hyunjin [6:45 PM]

She keeps asking when you're coming back over

Lixie [6:45 PM]

Awwww, tell her I said hi too

Lixie [6:46 PM]

How about tomorrow? After school?

Lixie [6:47 PM]

We can coordinate sleep over snacks for next

weekend

Hyunjin felt his heart grow lighter than air, floating on a bubble of helium. He quickly liked the message before agreeing to the idea.

It was only after Felix said goodnight, needing to help his mom with aforementioned chores that the brunette realized he probably should have cleared things with his mom first. After all, it *was* her house.

So he crept down the hall, finding her rooting through her dresser in search of something while his father worked on picking out his clothes for the next day.

“Hey uh, is it cool if Lix comes by after school tomorrow?”

He watched with only a mild flinch as both of his parents’ necks snapped up, eyes nailed on him like he'd just told them he was pregnant.

“Oh Bambi, of course! He's welcome here anytime! Will he be staying for dinner?”

“No brownies required,” his dad joked before seriously adding, “but always encouraged.”

Hyunjin shook his head, a smile tugging at his lips. He'd known they would say yes but it was still cute to watch them trip all over themselves in excitement. Maybe that was just the effect Felix had on all living creatures.

“I don't know if he'll stay for dinner but I'll ask.”

His mom nodded, pleased by this answer and turning back to her dresser, the matter settled.

*****

He meant to bring up the dinner question when he saw Felix in the morning but honestly, after the blond's fluffy tail wrapped itself around Hyunjin's ankle at the lockers, he sort of forgot how to breathe let alone to ask if he wanted to stay for dinner.

So then he was going to try to ask before calculus started but Felix skidded in with the bell and a sheepish grin to the teacher.

So Hyunjin decided he'd ask after calculus on the walk to lunch. But during class, he couldn't help but notice how the blond's mind seemed to be wandering again. He mindlessly chewed the back of his pen, eyes nailed to the front of the room but pupils a little too wide and a little too vacant.

It almost seemed familiar; that hyper focused look. To anyone else, it probably looked like he was *really* enraptured by math but Hyunjin saw his tail whipping unpredictablely in tiny little flicks. He saw his ears at full attention, poised to catch the sound of a pin drop.

And then it hit him.

It was like Felix was playing.

Like he'd seen a rouge piece of string and his entire body was coiling up in anticipation. Sure enough, when he looked a little harder, he saw that the blond had the edge of his desk in a death grip, like he was physically trying to keep himself in his seat.

Curious, Hyunjin looked to the front of the room, wondering what had Felix so zoned in that he couldn't pay attention and it only took him a few seconds to realize the laser pointer their teacher was using had to be the culprit.

He flicked it swiftly over the board, the playful red dot whipping around in tight circles around variables before darting across the white expanse to play around another piece of the formula.

Anywhere the dot went, Felix's eyes followed.

Hyunjin had to bite his tongue so he didn't coo out loud.

A new toy had been unlocked. One he desperately wanted to try later.

He was trying to remember if they even owned a laser pointer at home when the bell finally rang, the teacher reminding them of a quiz on Friday that had everyone groaning in unison. Nothing banded a student body together faster than the disgust of a quiz.

The red dot vanished, like it had never even been there. Hyunjin watched out of the corner of his eye as Felix blinked a few times before snapping back to reality. His eyes went wide, looking down to find his notebook devoid of any notes. A little flash of worry splashed over Felix's face.

Did he realize what was happening? Surely, he did. After all, if Hyunjin could figure it out, Felix probably knew too. But perhaps he was too shy to talk to the teacher about it. To explain that the laser pointer distracted that kitten part of him that he was so hesitant to fully embrace.

Hyunjin finished packing his things first and walked over to Felix as the blond struggled to close the zipper on his bag.

“Jin Jin, we have to hurry! The cafeteria is supposed to have cake today! We have to get some before it's all gone!”

Hyunjin smiled at Felix's excitement. “You go on ahead. I need to ask the teacher a question.”

Felix’s brow furrowed, eyes almost glaring at the teacher for taking Hyunjin away.

But Hyunjin just smiled at him and urged, “Go get me a piece of cake, okay? I'll be right there.”

At the reminder of cake, Felix grew serious once again, nodding solidly and even throwing the taller boy a salute before nearly sprinting out of the room.

The brunette smiled after him, so fucking besotted by the things Felix took so seriously. Like sweets and keychains and locker decor and sprinkles on brownies.

Hyunjin took a deep breath and pulled his backpack further up his shoulder, squaring them like he was about to ask for a raise.

“Um, Mr. Buo?”

His teacher jumped a little, not expecting a student behind him as he wiped the board clean of formulas.

“Mr…Hwang, is it?” He said skeptically, eyebrows raised.

“Yes sir,” he confirmed politely, really hoping his below average grade in the class wasn’t going to work against him in this. He might not be a *model* student but he wasn't disruptive either.

“Well how can I help you?” Mr. Buo asked, turning back to the board and continuing his work of clearing it.

“Um, I-I…well, I have a bit of an odd request.” He said, gripping the strap of his back pack together and trying not to literally shuffle in his spot. He'd hate to add to the scuff marks that littered the school's old floors.

Intrigued, his teacher turned back around once the board was cleaned, crossing his arms in front of his chest and inclining his head for Hyunjin to continue.

“I just…could you maybe not uh…not use the laser pointer during class?”

God, he sounded ridiculous. And he could tell by the blank look

followed by several fast blinks that Mr. Buo had not been expecting that.

“It's just, I think it's a little distracting for some. During class.” Hyunjin rushed to explain.

Mr. Buo stared back at him, looking positively befuddled. “Distracting?”

Hyunjin sighed. He'd already opened this can of worms and there was no shutting it so he might as well full-send it and make it worth something at least.

“Yeah. For Felix.” He said, watching his professor's brow furrow even deeper.

“He's been struggling in class lately. Like, struggling to pay attention. And normally, he's pretty good about taking notes and stuff but lately, he's been having trouble keeping up. And I noticed…well and I mean, I could be wrong but…he's a kitten hybrid, ya know? And sometimes, he, I don't know. Things that might entertain a kitten…entertain *him.”* He cringed a little at his wording but he didn't know how to tell his *teacher* about Felix’s fucking adorable kitten tendencies.

Thankfully, it seemed to work. He saw the puzzle piece slot into place behind Mr. Buo’s eyes. The wheels were turning. “I see,” he said slowly, thinking it over in his head. “Obviously that wasn't my intention! I've just never had a hybrid of any kind in a class before. I suppose I didn't think of what kinds of things might impede their learning.”

Hyunjin nodded. It made a lot of sense honestly. And it's not like the thought his teacher was purposefully and maliciously trying to toy with Lixie. However, he was also pretty sure that Felix would never bring this up on his own and Hyunjin was not willing to let the blond fail a class because he was too embarrassed to ask a simple favor.

“Regardless, I appreciate you saying something.” Mr. Buo said with the kind of warm smile he hardly received from adults or authority figures.

He watched with relief as Mr. Buo scooped up the laser pointer and dumped it in the top drawer of his desk.

“Thank you,” the brunette said with a nod. He turned to leave, knowing Felix was probably throwing elbows in the cafeteria to secure

cake when Mr. Buo called out to him.

He turned to find a look on his face that almost resembled pride. “Mr. Lee is very lucky to have a friend like you.”

Hyunjin wasn't sure if Mr. Buo was genuinely thankful for the heads up or if part of him thought he was watching the reform of a delinquent and felt partially responsible. Like his influence in Hyunjin's life had made him see the light and saved him from a lifetime of seedy back alley drug deals and prison sentences.

Whatever the reason, Hyunjin nodded and answered honestly. “I'm the lucky one.”

With that, he offered a shallow little wave and ducked out of the room, determined to watch the bloodshed of the great cake war himself.

Turns out, he only got to bask in the aftermath but Jisung did indeed have a bump on his forehead and a bite mark on his arm.

“Jisingie tried to take your cake!” Felix snitched as soon as he sat down next to the blond.

“Nu-uh! I thought you'd brought it for *me*.” Jisung whined, hand tenderly massaging his temple as if trying to ease the ache of some casual blunt force trauma.

“Liar! You *knew* it was for Jin Jin!’

“How could I have *possibly* known that!”

“Because I was singing, *cake for Hyunnie, cake for me! Cake for tummies and not for Ji!”*

Jisung rolled his eyes performatively. “Oh *please,* Ji could have been *anyone*.”

“Jiji, shut up and eat your cake,” Minho said upon arrival, setting a plate with a fat slice of cake in front of his friend.

Jisung looked up at him like he was going to cry and Hyunjin was about one second from screaming *just kiss already* when a fork appeared in front of his mouth, a too big bite of chocolate cake speared on the end.

He blinked before following the path down the line of Felix's arm and

finding that secretly freckled face looking hopeful and bashfully pink in the cheeks.

Hyunjin had always imagined death as vaguely scary. Turns out, the grim reaper was part kitten and positively adorable.

On some weird, ancient autopilot that told Hyunjin's animal brain to do whatever the love of his life wanted, he moved forward and accepted the bite, too shy to maintain eye contact while he did it.

The blond giggled, fucking elated. “How is it? Is it good?”

Hyunjin nodded, careful to finish his food before saying, “Yeah. But if you baked a cake, it would probably be better.”

He heard another giggle from Felix and a snicker across the table from Minho. He looked up and saw the brunette smirking at him in a way that felt weirdly conspiratorial. Like he knew what Hyunjin was doing and approved.

It bolstered the taller boy, cutting a piece of cake from Felix’s slice and holding it up to him, the other hand cradled underneath to catch any crumbs.

The blond blinked once at the cake before his wide eyes flitted up to check Hyunjin's eyes for permission. He nodded, really just a subtle dip of the head and that was all Felix needed apparently.

He leaned forward, his big smile making it hard to take the bite. And even though Hyunjin should have probably exploded and died and a million other embarrassing things in that moment, something about Felix's warm smile and the way he was giggling just made Hyunjin laugh too. Giggling, Felix wiped the corner of his mouth clean of chocolate frosting.

“Awww, you two are so cute,” Chan said from the other side of Felix, eyes glowing.

“That's all Jin Jin,” Felix said effortlessly, tossing a wink at Hyunjin like what he'd said wasn't the biggest lie on the planet.

“W-what?” He stuttered, feeling genuinely a little offended. “No, no, no, no that's *you.*”

“Me?”

“Of course! Cute is like your *thing.*”

“My thing?”

“Yes!” Hyunjin said breathlessly. It was very important to him that Felix knew this beyond a shadow of a doubt.

The blond’s smile twisted to the side in a poor attempt to keep it hidden. “So…you think I’m cute?”

Hyunjin froze, hearing a very unhelpful ‘*oooo’* from Seungmin across the table. As terrifying as it was to say it to his face, it really wasn’t an option to lie either.

“I-I mean, o-of course.”

And beautiful and intelligent and playful and fun to be around.

But he didn’t say that part because his mouth was already incredibly dry, his shoulders trying to hunch in on him in a futile attempt to disappear.

But then he felt that little hand on his knee, secretive and sweet, under the table. A brief squeeze before it disappeared, almost like he’d imagined it. But one look at Felix’s wide, brown eyes and the way he batted his lashes told him that he hadn’t.

And Hyunjin was reminded for the thousandth time that he didn’t need to be nervous around Felix. Not when it came to being vulnerable or telling the truth, at least. The blond had never been anything but open and accepting with him. Every single step, every single secret shared.

Felix was safe.

He let a little satisfied smile bloom on his lips before cutting off another bite of cake, this time for himself. He ate all of his cake before he even *touched* his lunch because apparently there were no rules anymore and he could do whatever he wanted.

Felix nearly inhaled his cake before stealing a bite from Jisung and nearly igniting World War 3. Minho merely sighed and dropped a replacement bite on Jisung’s plate and oh my god, if they weren’t dating by the end of the semester, Hyunjin was going to file a formal complaint.

Changbin leaned over, asking Hyunjin about heart zone training with running and he found himself trying to explain to Binnie that if he was in zone 3 when walking, then he probably needed to start out with crawling or something less taxing on his cardiovascular system.

There was a moment, as Felix asked Minho a question about their calculus class and Seungmin nearly dropped his milk and Chan scolded him about being more careful where Hyunjin thought this felt *normal.* When Jeongin accidentally kicked his foot, thinking it was the leg of the table, when Binnie laughed loud enough to turn heads from several tables down, Hyunjin wondered if he looked like he belonged here. At this table. With these people.

He felt like he did.

And when the bell rang, signaling it was time to get back to the real world, Hyunjin realized that he no longer worried about whether he'd be allowed back the next day. He knew he would be. He knew he could show up and sit down and not worry about everyone moving to a different table. He didn't need to eat in the bathroom stall or sit alone and on display for the student body to side-eye and judge.

He had a place at this table. With these people.

His friends.

And when Felix waved goodbye, chirping that he'd see him later, he didn't even need to ask if he'd save him a seat in study hall. He *knew* he would.

How odd it was to have people he could count on for simple things like friendship and belonging.

Hyunjin floated through his remaining classes, a warmth in his chest that felt steady and comforting. He wondered if this was how normal people navigated life; with this solid knowledge that they had a place they belonged.

He could get used to the easy closeness with someone like Felix who would brush invisible lint off his shoulder or grab his knee out of excitement or lean in close to look at whatever Hyunjin's current mood board on Pinterest was.

He tried to ignore the way his cheeks blushed and his heart raced and instead tried to soak it all in instead.

Study hall passed quickly, no actual studying having been done. As soon as the bell rang, Felix sprang to his feet, a giddy smile on his face as he bounced in place.

“Time to go!” He chirped, pulling his half open backpack on and nearly dumping the contents on the floor.

Hyunjin lunged forward, catching his history text book before it fell and shoved it back in. He zipped the thing up before asking, “Do we need to stop at the lockers? Do you need anything?”

“Oh, yes!”

No further explanation given, Felix raced off, yelling, “Come on, Jin Jin!” over his shoulder.

The brunette chuckled and chased after him, wearily keeping watch for teachers. He didn’t want either of them getting in trouble for running in the hallways. If he spent the afternoon in detention instead of in his room with Felix and a laser pointer, he’d be devastated.

The blond nearly slid into his locker, apparently *very* eager to be done with the day and joining the Hwang’s for the afternoon.

Felix ripped his locker open, diving inside only to reappear with a slightly bent sticker sheet and a handful of hard candies.

“*These* were the essentials you needed?” Hyunjin said with a laugh, slowly opening his own locker to take out a few books he wouldn’t be needing tonight.

Felix merely rolled his eyes and grabbed another sparkly pen that he probably would insist was his favorite (even though they *all* were) as well as a pair of heart shaped sunglasses.

“Alright, ready!” He slammed his locker shut and stood, following Hyunjin out to the parking lot.

He was still bouncing on his toes, eyes roving all over the parking lot before he stopped in his tracks, a look of confusion hitting his face. “Where’s your bike? I thought it was fixed.”

“It is.” Hyunjin confirmed. “But I left it at home.”

The frown on Felix’s face deepened. “But why?”

“Because I don’t have a second helmet and I wasn’t going to make you

walk to my house alone." Hyunjin said easily before freezing himself.

"Wait…did you think we were going to take my bike?"

His mind was short-circuiting at the very mental image of it.

"Well, can you blame me?" Felix asked, his confusion melting into something like bashfulness.

And he supposed he couldn't but he also could *not* think of Felix sitting behind him. *Straddling* the bike. Holding on tight on the turns and squealing when he pushed the speed.

His stomach was turning excited circles, his head spinning. He felt like a piece of clothing going round and round in the wash and god, he didn't know if he loved it or fucking hated it.

"I mean, I…well, no. I just, I-I…I only have one helmet." He said lamely. It was the honest to god truth but he'd never really thought that Jisung would be *right* when he'd teased that Felix would want a ride someday.

Nope.

No.

Phrasing. He could not think of it like that.

No rides. On anything. Ever.

"Well you should get a second one," Felix said easily, oblivious to the fact that Hyunjin was currently trying to figure out how many Hail Marys he owed the Lord.

He must have nodded or something affirmative because Felix grinned at him before confidently walking in the direction of Hyunjin's house.

They walked side by side, Felix talking a mile a minute about the pros and cons between muffins and cupcakes.

Hyunjin listened like there would be a test, honestly fascinated by Felix's thoughts on anything. If he was interested in something, he threw his everything into it and he really admired that about him.

When they finally reached his house, his mom just so happened to be *casually* sweeping the front porch. She broke out in a big smile the moment they appeared and rushed forward like she wanted to hug

Felix.

She held back at the last moment, smiling almost a little too wide as she greeted them. “Lixie! It's so good to see you!”

“Hi Mrs. Hwang!” He crowed happily, absolutely making her *day* when he rushed forward to give her a hug.

She *beamed,* smiling at Hyunjin over the kitten’s shoulder before releasing slowly.

“How was school today, boys?”

Hyunjin shrugged . “It was fine.”

“Fine?! Jinnie, did you forget that Jisung nearly took your cake? The cake I fought for so valiantly?”

“You bit him, Lix. I don't think that's valor.”

“Valor is subjective.”

Hyunjin rolled his eyes and caught the way his mom was gazing at their back and forth with such fond approval it made him blush.

Something about her witnessing him and Felix getting along made him feel proud. Like he could show her just how cool it was to have someone like *Felix* like him.

He started to lead the blond inside when his mom asked, “Will Felix be staying for dinner?”

“That's an option?” Felix said, eyes wide and looking at Hyunjin for permission.

“Oh, yeah! Sorry, I meant to ask but I forgot.”

Felix shook his head like this sort of thing happened all the time before smiling at Hyunjin's mom. “I would love to stay for dinner. But only if I can help this time!”

His mom giggled, reaching out to pat Felix's shoulder gently as she moved around him to the kitchen. “Alright, alright. But only because you insist! Why don't you two relax a little first? I'll call when I need you.”

Felix grinned happily, agreeing with happy ears standing up straight.

The two boys ascended the stairs, going to Hyunjin's room only for Felix to throw his backpack on the floor and rip it open. He was always so violent with the poor thing that Hyunjin had to wonder how many he shredded on a yearly basis.

“Jinnie! Jin Jin, I brought something for us!”

Intrigued, the taller boy set his bag down and sat on the floor, criss cross applesauce, curious what it could be.

The blond happily pulled out these perfect little plastic wrapped squares of bright colors.

“I brought clay! I thought we could make keychains!”

Sure enough, he pulled out some key rings and fasteners. It didn't look like the *proper* way to make a keychain, from Hyunjin's limited knowledge but the eagerness of Felix erased his worries of their structural integrity.

“I-I mean…if you want to?” Felix said, pausing in his excited movements as doubt crept in.

“Of course I want to,” Hyunjin said immediately. Because he *did.* Because something about Felix wanting to share something creative with him was so fucking sweet, made him feel so fucking *seen.*

“So what are you gonna make?” He asked as he started to help unwrap the clay from its plastic.

“I don't really know yet,” Felix said, eyes roving all over Hyunjin's room in search of inspiration. “What's your favorite flower?”

“My favorite flower?” He asked dumbly.

The blond nodded. “Yeah. You have so many of them so you must have a favorite, right?”

Hyunjin shrugged. “I dunno. I like all flowers.”

“Yeah but what's your *favorite*?”

He couldn't help but chuckle at Felix's persistence. He aimlessly began rolling the black clay around and around between his palms, creating a seamless, smooth sphere.

“I mean…I like Cali lilies. We had some in the garden for one of our

houses. But mums are pretty too. I like that they bloom in the fall when everything else is dying."

He thought through the sunflowers he'd seen on a class trip once when he was in 1st grade and how they'd looked so unreal to him. Too big, too bright. He thought about the tulips his dad would bring his mom on her birthday every year and sometimes just because. He thought about the carnations he'd set in his great uncle's casket when he was in middle school.

Flowers, all kinds, had always been something he'd loved. To smell, to paint, to have. But a favorite?

He supposed it was actually pretty simple actually.

"I guess my favorite is a rose." He said softly, thinking of the one Felix had given him, taped to the inside of his locker door. "They're romantic."

He kept his eyes on his fingers in the clay as Felix cooed at him, feeling his cheeks heat up.

"Of *course,* it's a rose. You big softie." The way he said it was with such affection that Hyunjin nearly passed away.

"A rose. That's what I'll make for you." Felix said with certainty, grabbing for the red clay and starting to mold it with his tiny hands.

"For me?" Hyunjin asked, head popping up and stare at the blond who had flipped down on his belly, tail swishing languidly back and forth.

He hummed in affirmation like it was no big deal and not the *second rose* he'd given Hyunjin.

"Well…what's your favorite flower?" Hyunjin asked, setting the black clay down.

Felix bit his bottom lip but kept his eyes on his project. "Daisies." He said simply.

Hyunjin nodded. He remembered the big, bold daisies in his cardigan last time he was here. It made sense. They were cute and playful, just like the blond himself.

"Then I'll make a daisy." He said, reaching for the white clay.

Felix giggled before lapsing into silence, his expression turning serious

and focused. Usually, Felix was an endless stream of chatter but surprisingly, the silence didn't feel awkward. In fact, it felt comfortable. Like something Hyunjin could get used to.

He watched the blond bury the chain deep inside his clay flower. He added a healthy dose of super glue carefully around it before encasing it with layers of clay to secure the keychain inside.

Hyunjin was pretty sure the proper method involved drilling a little hole into the dried project but he appreciated the simplicity and ingenuity.

The daisy was simple and done almost instantly, so Hyunjin added a few bright green leaves around it before calling it finished and shamelessly watching the way Felix's little fingers poked and prodded the clay into a lumpy rose that he would treasure for the rest of his life.

His little tongue was poking out the corner of his mouth, his entire being entirely focused on his project.

Which sort of made Hyunjin want to ruin that concentration.

"I'm going to go to the bathroom real quick," Hyunjin said softly, standing up and making his way out to the hallway.

But instead of going down the hall, he snuck downstairs to rifle through the junk drawer. He found loose batteries and cheap tape, candle lighters and stamps. But not the thing he was actually looking for.

"Mom?" He asked, knowing she would be in the kitchen. "Do we have a laser pointer?"

Sure enough, her head poked out from around the corner, her arm wrapped around a big bowl and her other hand turning a wooden spoon around and around inside. "Check your father's office. He might have one he's used for presentations before. Why?"

"Just testing something," He said vaguely as he strode down the hallway to avoid further questions. Felix seemed a little hesitant to share his kitten side with others so he didn't want to effectively "out" him if it would make him uncomfortable.

He peered in his dad's home office, finding it empty. It wasn't unusual since he usually worked on sight, but it still felt like a sign from the

universe that Hyunjin was on the right path. He carefully and respectfully opened the drawers to his desk, careful not to disrupt things or misplace anything.

Thankfully, resting neatly in the third drawer he tried, was the laser pointer. He grinned, grabbing it and softly shutting the drawer behind him. He tested it out, shining a playful red dot in the center of his palm.

Satisfied, he walked back up the stairs towards his room. A giddy excitement battled with soft nerves, wondering if he was allowed to do this. Last time he and Lix had played, they'd *both* had a blast. He was sure of it. He would never forget that heartmelting smile from Felix or the happy sway of his tail afterward. But his brain had a funny habit of rewriting memories and coloring them with anxiety and doubt.

He took a deep breath, pausing outside his room. Either Lix was confused and thought he was a mild loser *or* he'd be as joyful as he'd been last time. And Hyunjin was willing to take that risk if Felix's happiness was an option.

He stepped into the room, looming in the doorway like a creep only to find Felix still laying on the floor, feet up in the air and lazily kicking back and forth while he worked diligently on adding a dark green leaf to the side of his rose.

Slowly, Hyunjin raised the laser pointer and pressed the button.

A red dot appeared just under Felix's nose, on the carpet by his hands. He froze. His entire body went stiff and silent, like he was a statue. A long second passed before big brown eyes slowly rolled up to Hyunjin. Almost like they were afraid to leave the red dot unattended.

Hyunjin offered a little smile, suddenly feeling so stupid. What if this was offensive? What if he was accidentally being a total dick about this?

He carefully raised the corners of his lips, nodding his head slightly as if to give Felix permission to do whatever it was his eyes were asking.

And that was all the blond needed. With a creeping smile on his pink lips, Felix's hands abandoned his clay keychain, his entire body coiling tight like a spring. His butt wiggled, his tail oddly still like it was trying to remain a secret before he *pounced.*

Both hands closed over the red dot only for it to disappear right through his fingers. The blond yelped, sitting up to find the red dot playing over the carpet, over toward the bed! He flew after it, skidding to a stop and diving under the bed only to find it gone once again. Hurriedly, he backed out and found it once again on *top* of the bed this time! He pounced again, battling against the elusive dot in a grand battle. Every time he thought he'd trapped it, it appeared on top of his hands and danced away.

It flickered on and off, appearing and reappearing as it pleased, sending Felix on a wild goose chase.

Hyunjin was breathless, watching Felix full send after their little game. His smile was bright, almost feral like a street cat. His hips were swaying with how hard his tail was whipping about and these adorable little chitters were starting to pour out of him. Sort of like the one's Hyunjin had seen cats do on the internet when they watched birds.

It now owned his entire heart and soul.

After nearly ten minutes of the blond racing around his room, he heard his mom call them from downstairs. It was time for Felix to help and the end of their play session.

With a sad little smile, Hyunjin stopped pressing the button, the red dot disappearing. Felix stood on top of his desk chair, surveying every last inch of the room for it.

"Sorry Lixie, play time is over. It's time to go help in the kitchen."

The blond didn't seem to comprehend these words, still searching for the missing intruder. He pouted, hopping off the chair and slowly creeping toward Hyunjin like he was expecting it to appear suddenly and wage war again.

And as tempted as Hyunjin was to make that happen, he knew Lix would be upset when he was calmed down if he didn't help with dinner like he'd insisted.

"Come on, Lix." He said softly, hand reaching out without a plan. It sort of just lingered in the air in his direction.

Felix, still coming out of the fog, took his hand and turned it this way and that, almost like he was now searching Hyunjin for the little red dot. The brunette giggled as the shorter man leaned out, peering

around Hyunjin like he expected to find it there. A little chitter falling from his lips like he was truly very confused by its sudden emergence and disappearance.

“Lixie,” Hyunjin giggled, feeling bubbly inside at how fucking *cute* he was. To think, this beautiful, wonderful man was comfortable enough around him to truly be himself? It was intoxicating. It was powerful in a humbling sort of way.

Felix placed his hands on Hyunjin’s chest, standing on his tip toes and trying to see over Hyunjin’s shoulder when he just couldn’t help it anymore. Once arm wound around the blond’s waist gently, reminiscent of those wonderful hugs they’d shared last time. His other arm reached up, hand cradling that soft ear and giving him the scratches he deserved. He’d *earned* them after fighting so hard.

Felix instantly melted into his palm, nudging his ear further into the scratches and humming appreciatively. Those hands went from resting on his chest to slowly massaging, kneading.

He was making biscuits.

And Hyunjin? Yeah, he was dead. Like well and truly, he had died and gone to heaven.

Would the cuteness ever stop? Was there no *end?*

“Oh Lixie, did you have fun?” He cooed. He tried not to but there was no other way to ask and *not* have it coming out sounding fond as *fuck* becasue oh my *god, he was.*

“So much fun, Jin Jin,” He said, his smile so wide and blissed out.

“So…it’s okay? That I did that?”

The blond nodded easily, much to his relief. “I like this. The...kitten time.” He giggled at his phrasing but Hyunjin smiled.

“I like kitten time too.”

“You do? You promise it’s not boring for you? Or weird?”

“Not weird. Cute.” Hyunjin said instantly.

He could *feel* the heat in Felix’s ear as he scratched it and looked down in time to see a pink blush flush over his cheeks. The blond giggled, hiding it by sliding his biscuit making machines around

Hyunjin’s waist and squeezing him tight.

Felix’s hugs were the best. For someone so small, he hugged *big*.

They stood there, swaying lightly for a moment until Felix sighed and pulled back. “Alright, kitchen?”

Hyunjin nodded, very proud of himself for not bodily dragging Felix back into their hug. “Kitchen.” He agreed.

Chapter End Notes

> More kitten time!!! And next chapter? Well, we're leading up to one of my favorite scenes I'll see you on Sunday!!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> Hello hello and happy Sunday! I hope you all have had a wonderful weekend and I want to give a huge thank you to everyone who's still reading, commenting and leaving kudos. I know I keep saying it but I don't often post such fluffy content so it was a little nerve-wracking to post. But the feedback has been so warm and loving and I can't tell you how much it means to me that you all are finding joy and some relief in this silly little story; that was the goal ❤ Alright, enough yapping! LET'S GO!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dinner was a resounding success. Both in taste *and* company. Felix had won his parents over with his sparkling giggle and thoughtful questions, delighting his mom when he displayed what she called ‘impressive knife work’ and what Hyunjin called ‘terrifying’. Did his little fingers have to be *that* close to the blade and did he have to chop so *fast?*

So with Hyunjin clutching his pearls in the corner, Felix woo’d his mother and chatted with his father and shot silly little smiles at Hyunjin and *goddammit* he loved him.

Dinner was delicious and Felix had praised his mom on loop until she was blushing and giggling like a school girl. He'd even gone so far as to offer to wash the dishes *again.* This had earned him fond frowns from all three Hwangs and he'd sheepishly acquiesced.

Hyunjin's *mom* had begged Felix to stay and watch a movie but it was a Monday night, after all and he insisted that he needed to get home before it got much darker. Which had his dad nudging him with his shoulder and saying with a lopsided smile, “He’s very responsible.” Which was parent speak for *oh my god, marry him.* At least, Hyunjin was pretty sure it was.

So Hyunjin's mom had given the blond a long swaying hug after he'd collected his things from Hyunjin's room and all too soon, he'd found himself out on the front porch, facing a smiling kitten and biting his bottom lip bashfully.

“Thanks for having me over.” Felix said to his feet, fingers clasped in

front of him.

“Of course. Any time.” Seriously, if Felix wanted to just move in, he was pretty sure his parents would agree easily.

“And…thanks for kitten time.” He said, looking up through thick lashes.

“Thank *you.”* Hyunjin said, quickly adding, “For feeling safe enough with me to…be yourself.”

Felix lifted his head slowly, his smile growing. He tripped forward a step, his tail reaching around him like it wanted to make contact.

“I uh…I made this for you.” Felix said with a giggle. He raised his clasped hands and opened them to reveal the shaky, lumpy, perfect rose he'd crafted. The clay had dried and cracked ever so slightly but it didn't matter because Felix had made it with his own two hands, specifically for him.

“You don't have to do anything with it if you don't want to-”

“Are you kidding? This is going straight in my backpack.” He wasn't sure if Felix noticed but he meant it as a vow. A promise.

And much like exchanging rings, Hyunjin pulled his keychain from his pocket. He held it out by the chain, letting it dangle and twist in front of the shorter man's glowing eyes.

“Oh Jinnie! It's perfect!” He said with such pride. He cupped it carefully in his palms like it was a small, precious bird. “Oh my *god,* you're such an *artist!* You can do it all! Draw, paint, nails *and* make keychains?” What *can't* you do?!”

Hyunjin ducked his head, unprepared for such praise. But he felt his heart growing in his chest. Maybe he should be more open with his art if it got him reactions like this from Felix.

Felix didn't waste a second. He immediately dropped his jingling backpack to the ground and hooked his new daisy keychain on the zipper of the main pocket. Front and center. It was like it had been given a place of honor. At least that's what Hyunjin's delulu brain told him.

They had both stared at it in silence, soaking in the quiet moment of the gift exchange. The dust settled and when Felix finally looked up at

him, Hyunjin didn't hesitate to step forward, scratching the base of his ear and earning another one of those dreamy smiles he liked to pretend were reserved for him alone.

“Text me when you get home, okay?” He felt so goddamn domestic saying it and he *loved* it.

“I will,” Felix said softly.

He wondered what the blond was thinking as he walked away. Wondered if he could feel Hyunjin’s eyes on his back as he became smaller and smaller, further and further away.

When he could no longer see him, he pulled that precious rose up to his face, wondering if the clay had trapped any of Felix’s fingerprints for him.

His cheeks heated up. He was obsessed. But maybe that was just part of what loving someone did to you.

He finally made it back inside, after he was super, *extra* sure that Felix wasn’t coming back. He tried his best not to drag his feet and pout but he had to admit, he felt a little mopey. And the second he slouched into the kitchen, his mom clocked it.

“Why didn’t you give him a ride home?” She asked curiously, carefully stirring honey into her tea.

“Don’t have a second helmet.” He said simply. “It would be irresponsible and dangerous to offer him a ride without a helmet.” There was no way in *hell* he’d allow Felix on that bike without proper protection to that glorious head and adorable ears.

His mom hummed thoughtfully, brows scrunched as her eyes watched her swirling tea. “Well, we’ll need to fix that.”

Hyunjin nodded but also shrugged, not sure how to answer. Yes, he would love to have Felix wrapped around him in unspeakable ways with the rumble of his bike underneath them. But he was also pretty sure he was emotionally, mentally and spiritually unready for such an event.

He grabbed the still mostly full tea kettle off the stove, pouring himself a cup and adding a sachet of tea while his mom hummed something under her breath. The house felt so much quieter without Felix in it.

Hyunjin had grown up in his head. Secreted away so he could drown in art and literature and all the soft poetic things his peers called ‘girly’ or ‘sensitive’. He had grown up with lovely, busy parents and new homes every few months. He’d grown up in houses without memories, beautiful and sterile and devoid of the kind of warmth that took time to seep into the paint through laughter and community.

And it had always been fine. And it was still fine. But for the first time, he actually noticed it. Because he’d seen a home filled with fire and light; sunshine incarnate.

“He is such a lovely boy.”

Hyunjin heard his mom’s voice behind his back, borderline wistful. He didn’t turn around because he thought he might have heard tears in her voice and seeing his mom cry would make him cry and that just wasn’t how he wanted to end his Monday.

“I am *so* glad you met him, Bambi.”

Hyunjin bit his lip harshly because yeah, her voice sounded wet, like it was breaking under a gratitude heavier than the sun.

“I am too.” He said it softly but he said it with his whole, entire chest.

When she didn’t add more, he nodded and took a long, deep breath through his nose before taking his tea and walking back to his room.

*****

On Tuesday, Hyunjin woke to a text from a sleepy Felix, asking if he should wear a red sweater with pink stripes or a pink sweater with red stripes.

Bleary eyed and half asleep, Hyunjin had typed out:

Hyunjin [6:02 AM]

How are they different?

Felix, who had apparently awoken with the sun, replied almost instantly.

Lixie💕 [6:03 AM]

THE RATIOS, JINNIE! THE RATIOS!

The brunette had groaned, brain barely operational.

Hyunjin [6:04 AM]

It's too early for ratios, Lix

Hyunjin [6:04 AM]

Both. Either. None. Kitten looks cute in anything.

He swore he saw his thumb hit the send button in slow motion, dread waking him up like a bucket of cold water.

He sat up ramrod straight, heart suddenly racing. He felt like he was going to throw up. Who *said* that? To their *friend*?

Lixie💕 [6:05 AM]

🧐❤□□□□

Lixie 💕 [6:06 AM]

Jinnieeeee stoooppppp □

Lixie 💕 [6:06 AM]

It's too early to make me blush this much

Hyunjin felt his own cheeks flood with heat, knowing he must be bright red. He and Felix matched. Which only made him blush more.

So he'd said something dumb and Felix had what? Liked it? Or at least not been disgusted.

Huh.

The week after that became a bit of an experiment for Hyunjin. Their text conversations flowed from morning until night. Sometimes the blond even texted him funny memes while they sat at the lunch table like he wanted to share a secret laugh. Something for just them.

And Hyunjin, attempting to be bold, would respond with giggles and heart reactions. It wasn't much but it was more than he'd experienced in his entire life. More than he could have ever imagined. It felt earth bending, game changing. It felt like fate maybe.

On Tuesday, when he finally made it into school, he saw Felix wearing a red and pink sweater and no, he couldn't tell you if it was red with pink stripes or pink with red stripes but it didn't matter; he was absolutely *adorable.*

So he'd gathered all of his courage and approached the blond who was crouching at his locker, reaching out to give his ear a little scratch.

A precious little chitter peeled out of Felix in surprise as he looked up to find Hyunjin smiling down nervously at him. And oh the blond had *beamed* up at him, cheeks doing a devastating pink as he whined, “Hyuneeee, you're too sweet! You're gonna spoil me!”

“Good.” Hyunjin said softly before moving his hands to his locker and out of the soft, silky fur.

He felt that fluffy tail hook securely around his ankle like it was trying to keep him close.

On Wednesday, when Minho had caught Han as he tripped over his own feet doing nothing more than walking to their lunch table, Hyunjin and Felix spend all of study hall with their desks shoved together, heads bent and nearly touching as they feverishly whispered plans on how to get them together finally.

And when Felix got excited at the idea of a highly choreographed game of spin the bottle and his little hand shot out to hold Hyunjin's, the brunette had simply squeezed back, wondering if Felix would just let him hold his hand a little longer.

And he did. The rest of the class. Which was only like 10 minutes at that point but *still.*

Hyunjin had gone from never even holding someone's hand before to having held *Felix's* hand.

Twice.

Shit was getting crazy.

On Thursday, Hyunjin kept the memory of Felix's delicate fingers under his own front and center in his mind. He remembered the smoothness of his skin and the way the blond had smiled at him like he hadn't mind at all that Hyunjin's hands were a little bit clammy. He thought about how Felix had been the one to instigate the contact and how it was almost always him and how it had to mean something, right?

That logic chased his doubts away long enough for him to nervously ask the blond if he could walk him to class that morning.

"I-it's just, see y-you're uh, your backpack looks really heavy."

It was practically empty after Felix had unloaded it into his locker but he'd already said it so it's not like he could take it back.

Regardless, Felix just bit his lower lip and ducked his head. "Yeah. It *is* pretty heavy." He said slyly, looking up through his lashes and slowly slipped the strap off his shoulder. "But only if you *insist."*

"I-I do." Hyunjin said, grimacing at his word choice and how it instantly supplied the vision of an altar in his mind. Good god, he really was helpless.

"Okay," Felix said softly, shyly handing his backpack over only for Hyunjin to realize his shoulders were already occupied with his own backpack. He slipped a single strap off, his bag dangling from his left shoulder while he added Lix's onto his right shoulder. It was a bit awkward and sort of lopsided but it was worth it to see Felix grin up at him and latch onto his arm like he truly wanted to be *escorted* to his first class.

If he'd thought the whispers had been rampant when Felix had worn his jacket, it was ten times more intense with the blond hanging off him, happily stepping down the hall with him. People didn't trip out of Hyunjin's way like normal. No, no, they stopped dead in their tracks and *stared,* probably convinced that the popular cheerleader kitten hybrid had been tricked into something horrific and toxic by the school's no good new kid.

There was this little part of Hyunjin that wanted to pull away. To maybe give Felix his bag back and mutter some excuse about how he had forgotten something in his locker and apologize before sprinting away to save his friend's reputation.

But he felt a little squeeze to his bicep and looked down to see Felix staring up at him with wide, warm eyes. "It's not too heavy, is it?"

"Not at all." He responded.

Felix giggled. "Jinnie is so strong," He said, shooting a little wink up at the taller man and nearly capsizing him completely. It should be *illegal* to look like that and be able to tease a mere mortal like Hyunjin.

He was about to fumble out something embarrassing about how he really wasn't when Felix jolted next to him, a little yelp coming out of him as he whirled around.

Surprised and concerned, Hyunjin turned with him, keeping a steadying hand on his back only to find Ho-Jin snickering as turned to giggle at Felix's outrage.

"*Ho-Jin!*" Felix crowed, sounding exasperated and exhausted. An angry blush was flooding his cheeks, his hands gripping his tail securely and pulling it close.

"Oh *calm do*-"

"Fuck off." Hyunjin said, voice coming out level and steady. He might not be great at standing his own ground but he would stand up for Felix no matter what.

Hand still resting between those shivering shoulderblades, he took a little step forward, admittedly a little delighted when Ho-Jin took a tiny step back in response. Sure, maybe him walking with Felix would damage the blond's reputation but right now? He was damn glad he had this bum wrap he'd done nothing to deserve. If being tall, dark

and quiet made him mysterious enough for the student body to fear, then he'd use it to his advantage.

"Hey man, I'm not looking for trouble." Ho-Jin said, hands up like he was facing the police.

"Aren't you?" Hyunjin challenged, taking another tiny step forward.

"I was just messing around."

"Yeah, well I'm not." Hyunjin said, not sure if he was really lying or not. He'd never hit someone and didn't particularly want to. But if anyone was going to inspire him into action, it would be this guy.

"Fuck. Off." He said slowly. He went to take another step forward when he felt a little tug to his arm. He looked back to find Felix looking at him with soft eyes.

"Come on, Jin Jin. He's not worth being late to class for."

Wise, *wise* words.

Hyunjin nodded after a beat and turned back only to see Ho-Jin escaping down the hall. The brunette couldn't help but snort and roll his eyes, thoroughly unimpressed. He could admit that he was a pretty embarrassing guy most of the time but at least he wasn't like *that*.

He turned back to Felix who had one hand lightly gripped Hyunjin's arm, the other other still gripping his tail like he was afraid to let it out of his sight.

"Did he pull your tail, Lix?" He asked, heart aching as his fingers reached out on instinct to trace the slender fingers wrapped around it.

Felix nodded, swallowing thickly. He didn't *look* like he was going to cry but it still broke this little part of Hyunjin's heart. Because Lix's tail was special. It was picky. It only liked a few people, Hyunjin included and *not* Ho-Jin.

"I'm sorry, kitten." He whispered, the nickname just slipping out.

The blond shrugged, letting go of his tail only for it to wrap safely around his waist. They started on the path back to Felix's first class as the shorter man said. "It's whatever. I'm just glad you were here."

Hyunjin offered a lopsided smile and the truth. "God forbid he actually ever wants to fight. I'm not sure I even know *how* to punch

someone."

Felix giggled, shuffling in close to Hyunjin's side again and hugging his arm to his chest securely. "Well, you were *very* convincing." Felix huddled in even closer, tightening his hold and adding, "Very *intimidating.*"

Hyunjin wasn't sure how to respond so he just chuckled awkwardly, his free hand raising up to rub the back of his neck as Felix guided them around a corner.

"You keep saving me." Felix mused. "I seriously owe you."

"No you don't."

"Sure I do." Felix said, voice teasingly insistent but holding a note of something genuine and tender. "I want to be able to save *you* every now and again."

"You already have."

Hyunjin clenched his jaw shut. It was too late to take the words back but he wasn't even sure he wanted to if he could. Felix should know just how much of an impact he'd had on Hyunjin's life. He should know that just by walking next to him, holding his arm, he was bringing Hyunjin back to life, over and over again.

"You're too nice to me." Felix said, his voice saturated with a warmth that bled straight into Hyunjin's bones.

"No such thing." Hyunjin said easily. He knew his words were probably too heavy but he meant them.

Eventually, they got to Felix's class and the blond had stared up at him, blinking slowly like he wanted to say something with his eyes. But Hyunjin didn't understand that language yet so he simply offered a smile back and hoped it was enough.

The rest of that day, any time he saw Felix, the blond gravitated closer than ever before. It was like the blond was pulled in by something invisible. They walked shoulder to shoulder, they sat hip to hip. He found Felix's tail trying to wrap around him at lunch and his little foot kept nudging his as he crashed their desks together in study hall.

By the time Hyunjin was supposed to ride home, he felt almost too intoxicated to drive. He was drunk off the proximity. Off the soft

touches that came so casually to Felix and the warm eyes that looked like melted chocolate and that deep little rumble that was so close to purr when he laughed.

God, he wanted to hear him purr.

He wanted more kitten time with yarn and laser pointers and new games.

He wanted more hugs that lasted too long and he wanted to pull back and find those saucer-like eyes staring up at him, inviting him in. He wanted to lean down and down and down and wipe the makeup from his cheeks, free his freckles and kiss them.

He rode home in a daze, feverish visions of his favorite kitten dancing in his head. It was to the point that when he finally parked at home, he checked the front of his bike to make sure he hadn't hit anything.

He worked on his homework, ate dinner with his parents and even watched a few random episodes of T.V. with them but when he was yawning and saying he'd see them in the morning, his mom stopped him, asking him to wait as his dad grabbed something. He stood, sleepy yet curious as he sat back down on the arm of the sofa.

His dad reentered, clearly holding something behind his back. His mom rose from the couch as she rushed over to stand by his side, a grin on her face that looked so damn hopeful.

"What is it?" Hyunjin finally asked.

"Ta-Da!" His mom flourished shimmering fingers around the grand reveal of…a helmet?

"You got me a helmet?" Hyunjin asked, his tired brain not really understanding the significance.

His mom nodded, eyes connecting with his and holding. "A *second* helmet."

Oh.

"A-a…a *second* helmet." Hyunjin repeated. His mouth was a little dry, thinking of all the possibilities this opened up. Well, one possibility really. "Really?" He asked, unsure why he needed it confirmed.

"Really." His dad said with a smile, holding the helmet out. "I hope it

isn't uncomfortable for his ears. There weren't really other options." His dad said it with such sincerity that it brought a smile to Hyunjin's face as he accepted it.

He turned it over in his hands carefully, marvelling at it like he'd never seen one before. "It's okay. I appreciate that you looked."

"Of course we did! And if it *is* uncomfortable for him, just tell us. We'll return it and get something different."

"Is this a gift for me or for Felix?" Hyunjin said, feeling his cheeks erupt in red as the words foolishly left his mouth.

His mom shrugged with a giggle. "Why not both?"

"Thank you." Hyunjin said quietly, finally letting the helmet drift down to dangle by his side, his gaze relocating back to his parents. "Thank you." He said again.

"Of course, Bambi." His mom said, reaching out to smooth his short hair. It was getting shaggy. He needed to figure out if he was going to let it grow or shave it short again.

"Next time, make sure he doesn't walk home alone in the dark, okay?" His dad cautioned, a little gleam in his eyes.

"Yes sir," Hyunjin replied before bidding them another goodnight and finally climbing the stairs to his room.

He carefully set the new helmet by his beat up backpack. It was much like his own; full coverage with a face plate to keep his face clean of bugs and dirt. It was a matte black, simple and unassuming and completely contrary to everything Felix believed in. But still, he couldn't help but smile, imagining Felix's reaction when he saw it.

Hyunjin had been bold this week. Or at least, bold by his standards. And so far, he'd had great success. So why not end the week strong? Why not just go for broke?

*****

Dear Diary,

Tomorrow, I'm going to ask Felix if he wants a ride home.

To whomever finds this diary, If I'm found dead, on the side of the road, one of two things has happened. 1. He said no and I died of heartbreak and rejection. 2. He said yes and I died of excitement and disbelief. Either way, I see no way out alive.

To whomever finds this, please tell Felix that I loved him.

Oh and my parents but they should really know that by now so Felix. Tell him first. And then let Minho know that I appreciated his friendship. But if he says we weren't friends, just tell him I was kidding. Same goes for Chan and Binnie. Tell them thanks for the run. And tell Jeongin that he needs to study for art history even if he thinks it's boring. And tell Seungmin that I wish I could have gotten to know him better but that I was also kind of afraid of him.

Oh, and for the love of god, someone please tell Jisung that Minho loves him too.

*****

Hyunjin tried to nonchalantly tuck the second helmet under his other arm on Friday morning but feared it looked far too obvious. Like one glance at him and people would be able to *tell* he was freaking out about asking Felix to ride with him after school.

So instead of trying to tetris it into his locker alongside his helmet, he strapped it onto his bike and left it outside. He was fairly certain that his reputation would keep anyone from trying to steal it.

So when he walked in like normal, with his singular helmet tucked under his arm and destined for his locker, he felt almost guilty. Almost like he was lying to Felix somehow. Like he was hiding something from him that really wasn't that big or important but *felt* like a total gamechanger to Hyunjin.

He was greeted by the bubbly blond, wearing his cheer uniform and leaning against the lockers next to theirs. He was blowing bright pink bubbles in a highly distracting way, twirling the ends of his ponytail

between his fingers while he scrolled his phone.

“Bubblegum? For breakfast?” Hyunjin joked as he approached.

Felix giggled, standing up straight and shoving him playfully in the shoulder. “Shut up! I ate boring, plain oatmeal at home earlier. I *deserve* this as a treat for getting through it.”

Hyunjin hummed with a smile, fitting his helmet inside the locker and slowly offloading the books he didn’t immediately need. “How do you normally eat your oatmeal?”

“So my absolute favorite is brown sugar, cinnamon and maple syrup.” Felix said immediately, like he had a predetermined tiering list in his head. “After that, it’s probably peanut butter or berries. But only if the berries are frozen! If they’re not, then they get all soggy and mushy too fast and it’s honestly kind of gross. But if they’re frozen they stay sort of crunchy and they turn the oatmeal fun colors!”

Hyunjin chuckled, utterly charmed by the simple joys Felix found in fucking everything. He wondered if he’d like to learn to paint. He could make the most drab scenery burst with flavor and color, he was just sure of it.

“What about you?” Felix asked, leaning his shoulder against the locker and fully facing Hyunjin.

“I don’t really like oatmeal.” He admitted to the scandalized gasp of Felix. “I mean, I’ll eat it if I have too. But I’d rather do congee.”

Felix scrunched his nose delicately before sighing dramatically. “I suppose you couldn’t *actually* be perfect. It’s okay Jin Jin, you’re still my favorite.”

Favorite?

How on *earth* had he secured that title? And just who had he stolen it from? Surely, they’d be angry if they ever found out but Hyunjin was willing to fight for it. It was strange how falling in love had suddenly made a life long door mat into someone willing to fight for things like justice and honor and the cessation of tail pulling.

“Hey so uh…what are you doing after school?”

Hyunjin was saved from his little spiral by Felix’s nervous words. The taller boy finally finished with his locker and closed it, spinning the

combination a few times to make sure it latched.

“Nothing.” He said, wondering if now was a good time to ask Felix about the whole ride home thing. “Why?”

“Well uh…so listen I know it’s probably not really your thing but there’s a pep rally after school.” Felix said shyly. He was focusing on his perfectly white sneakers as his tail wrapped around his waist for comfort.

“The dance team will do a routine and the marching band will play and stuff and they’ll announce all the basketball players and uh…well, we’ll do a couple of cheers. And I thought maybe you’d, if you’re not busy, maybe you could…come?”

Hyunjin blinked a few times at the blond, stunned by his bashfulness. It wasn’t his first time seeing Felix get shy but it always felt a little like an honor. He never really saw the blond get nervous around anyone else but him.

It was cute.

“I’d love to come and watch you cheer.” He said with a soft smile. And he wasn’t even lying. Sure, a pep rally probably wasn’t really his scene but he’d also never been to one before so he couldn’t be sure. And more importantly, he’d love the chance to watch Felix in action. He knew he worked hard at cheer. He may run late to practice a lot but he *never* missed.

“Really?” Felix said, eyes *shining* as he bounced on his toes excitedly. He gripped his tail even tighter and Hyunjin couldn’t help it.

He reached out, giving the tip of his ear a tiny little tug and laughing. “Of course.”

Felix smiled wide, a little chitter busting out of him at the ear tug. He reached out playfully, tugging lightly on Hyunjin’s ear in return, carefully not to tug too hard on his earring.

Hyunjin laughed, wondering what they must look like to the other students, tugging each other's ears and giggling.

“Okay! Well it’s in the gymnasium after study hall, so…you’ll be there?”

Hyunjin nodded as they slowly started walking the vague direction of

Felix's classroom. "Yeah, I wouldn't want to let Binnie down." He said with a smile.

Felix cackled. "Oh no, we wouldn't want that, would we?"

"Never."

Which was actually true but obviously *not* the motivation behind Hyunjin going. However, at lunch it became very clear to him that this was completely lost on the man himself.

Changbin was *delighted* to hear that Hyunjin would be in attendance and proceeded to give him a play by play breakdown of just how complex his lifts and catches were and educating the taller man on a proper way to execute a basket toss. Catch? Basket catch? Honestly, Hyunjin couldn't keep up but he appreciated his passion.

"Lix is 100% safe with me there, don't you worry Hyunnie." Changbin assured him as the bell finally rang at the end of lunch. "I would *never* let him fall."

Hyunjin hadn't really stopped to think about the other side of this. The part where Felix was thrown through the air and how gravity would try to drag him back down to the hard, wood floors of the gymnasium.

He felt a fluffy tail reach around him, as if trying to soothe.

"It's true." Felix said with a grateful smile at Binnie. "He's the only reason I agreed to be a flier in the first place."

Changbin *beamed* with pride, subtly trying to flex and show off his obscenely muscled arms.

Hyunjin tried not to feel self-conscious, reminding himself that Felix had been latching onto *his* arm in the hallways, not Binnie's.

The rest of the day flew by in the way Friday's rarely did. Hyunjin was both thankful for this and stressed, feeling like somehow he'd had less time to mentally prepare himself.

Felix actually had a special pass to leave study hall halfway through to prepare for the pep rally. He'd confirmed shyly *again* that Hyunjin would be there and he'd smiled, assuring him he wouldn't miss it for the world.

Sincerely, a bomb could go off and he'd find a way to be there, pretending to have school spirit.

He attempted to actually study in the latter half of study hall but he found his mind being pulled back to the possibility of Felix scoffing in his face and telling him he didn't want a ride home.

Which was ridiculous because Felix was pure sugar. Sure, he could be a little sassy but he wasn't unkind. The cheerleader his mind supplied was stereotypical and savage. Rolling their eyes and looking him up and down like he was a piece of gum stuck to the bottom of his shoe. But real life Felix would never do that. He would simply say no thank you and probably still offer you a hug.

Hyunjin clung to that knowledge as the bell rang and students flooded the hallways. He swallowed thickly, a nervous knot forming in the pit of his stomach. He desperately wished he had some water to anxiously sip or something.

He hadn't been to the gymnasium yet since he didn't have a gym class this semester but a gymnasium was a gymnasium. They were practically identical across every school he'd ever attended. Some were newer, with fresh lines on the basketball court and some were dingy and sad. Some had winning teams that the town obsessed over and some didn't even have teams at all, not enough students to play or not enough funding or both.

But the rumble of students filling the bleachers and the squeaks of sneakers on the wood floors was familiar. Not comfortingly so, god no. Hyunjin *hated* gym class. But familiar, nonetheless.

He wanted to get a front row seat but all of those were already taken so he was forced into the middle of the pack. Thankfully, even though he'd been forced halfway up the bleachers, he was able to snag a seat on the end, giving his legs room to stretch out into the walkway when no one was there. He sighed in relief. Cramped bleachers were a nightmare for people with long legs like him.

The poor kid next to him looked like wanted to cry and nervously tried to shrink away from him, damn near climbing in her friend's lap to create some distance. Hyunjin thought about saying hello. Maybe offering a smile. But his nerves took over and before he could try to push past them, the principal was tapping on a mic down on the court.

All these weeks and Hyunjin had never actually seen the principal.

She was an older woman who stood tall, with shoulders back and her hair in a neat, silver bun. While her skirt suit was a cheap polyester, she carried herself like she was wearing the finest Chanel and Hyunjin had to admit, he found it classy as hell.

She spoke in a deep, croaky sort of voice that cut through all the whispers and giggles. She said some generic, banal words about teamwork and school spirit and how it wasn't always about winning. It was followed by a polite round of applause and then the dance team came prancing out.

The old speaker system shook, trying to pump out the bass. The songs were barely recognizable top forty but Hyunjin had to admit, the dance team was great. They were perfectly synchronized, their formations flawless and he even found his foot tapping along to the counts.

They finished to boisterous applause and cleared out with cheerfully, peppy waves to the crowd.

And then came the cheerleaders.

It wasn't hard to spot Felix. He shone like a fucking *star.* Sure, he was little but his bright blond ponytail damn near glowed under the fluorescents, second only to his bright showman smile.

Hyunjin had never seen someone smile with so many teeth before and still look genuine. But he *did.* He looked absolutely delighted to be here.

They silently moved into formation and Hyunjin caught himself holding his breath. He was excited but he also had a dull thump of fear underlining every heartbeat. He was nervous to see Lixie shooting through the air like the star he was. But if he trusted Binnie, then Hyunjin would too.

The music started with a bang, louder than expected and they were off. All of Felix's moves were precise and perfect. He grinned like mad, his small pom poms waving about merrily. It didn't take long though before he was tossing them off to the side, freeing up his hands as he moved back into Binnie's grasp.

Hyunjin watched with jealousy and trepidation as Changbin's hands closed solidly around Felix's waist, the blond's own hands gripping his wrist as they bounced him up into place, high in the sky.

Hyunjin felt his eyes go wide as Changbin held one of Felix's feet securely in both hands, looking up to make sure his friend wasn't going to tip over. But sure enough, the blond was beaming out at the crowd, other leg raised up and chanting loudly, "Say it with, all your chest! Pine *Crest!* Pine *Crest!*"

The crowd shouted back the second part, obviously familiar with this one. The brunette looked around and saw people standing, cheering back at the team and clapping excitedly as Felix and some other girl were thrown up, flipping back down into their spotters grip.

Binnie caught him without a single flinch and Hyunjin could see his smile from here. As jealous as he was to watch those hands all over Felix's little waist, he had to admit he was glad it was Changin and not anyone else. *Especially* not Ho-Jin. Thankfully, he was at the other end of the formation, completing some admittedly impressive tumbling.

Felix did some floorwork, hyping up the crowd even more before getting hoisted back above Changbin's head, thrown in the air and being caught in what was probably one of those basket catch/toss things Binnie had been talking about.

The whole routine couldn't have lasted longer than five minutes max but it felt like a small century. Hyunjin was at the edge of his seat the entire time, not only with apprehension but with awe.

Felix was *radiant.* He shone brighter than all the other cheerleaders. And it made sense, because he was someone who was naturally peppy. He could find the joy in all the little things, even a boring basketball game that he had no personal interest in. But it was more than just his beauty or the way he moved perfectly to the beat. It was all the little things that Hyunjin noticed too; the things no one else could have taught Felix.

It was the way his tail fanned out grandly at the top of the pyramid but the way it would wrap carefully and quickly around him before a catch. It was the way his ears flattened ever so slightly as if to keep them close and make sure they stayed out of the way.

All these tiny, minute adjustments that Hyunjin wasn't even sure Felix knew he was doing were fascinating. It showed just how much thought, energy and passion he put into this. It took it from being something that was pretty cool to majorly impressive.

They ended with Felix in the air, top of the pyramid and breathing

hard through his beaming white smile. His brown eyes were roaming the entire crowd, as if searching for something. Or someone.

And when his eyes finally locked with Hyunjin's, the brunette watched in amazement as that big smile became impossibly larger and he started waving fervently at him. Blushing, Hyunjin offered a shy wave back, not missing the shocked glances from the kids around him.

He ignored them as best he could, watching the cheer team gallop off the floor, cheering the whole way.

The principal came back up to the mic, looking very proud and singing their praises before introducing what she assured the student body was a championship winning team. Player after absurdly tall player came out to roaring applause, bowing kindly to the audience or brazenly fist pumping the air like they'd already won something.

Once they'd all been wished a successful season, the principal announced their first game for the following Thursday and reminded the student body that the soccer team was also in full swing, urging everyone to come out and support both teams. Hyunjin would not be doing that but he supposed it was exciting news based on the roar of the crowd around him and how they stomped on the bleachers.

And then the eager crowd was rushing off the bleachers, pushing and shoving and desperate to be done with their Friday even though they'd all *voluntarily* come to this thing.

Hyunjin took his time, politely letting people cut in front of him time and time again before he finally made it off the bleachers and onto that squeaky clean wood floor.

He milled about awkwardly. The cheer and dance teams had reemerged from the locker rooms, still dressed in their uniforms. There was a mass of people, chatting and goofing around and at the center of it was Felix. Changbin was close by his side, telling some animated story to a few of the girls on the dance team and sending them into full on belly laughs.

Felix was chatting with another girl from the cheer team, heads bent close as she showed him something on her phone.

Perhaps Hyunjin should just go. He could ask some other time. After all, it's not like the helmet was going anywhere. Plus, crowds really weren't his thing and he didn't want to embarrass Felix by calling out to him like some lame parent coming to collect him. He could just slip

out, undetected. Maybe text him later and tell him he did a great jo-

“Hyunnie! Jin Jin, where are you going?”

Hyunjin’s head snapped to the side to find a blond bombshell barrelling toward him. He cut a clean path through the crowd who had turned to stare, whispering behind their hands as Felix screeched to a halt in front of him.

“Jinnie, you came!”

Hyunjin glanced at the onlookers before deciding he really didn’t give a shit. Felix wasn’t dumb; if he cared about what this could do to his reputation, he wouldn’t be doing this.

“Of course I came, Lixie. You were incredible!”

“R-really? You liked it?”

“Loved it. You were the best part.” Hyunjin said easily before adding, “After Binnie, of course.”

“Of course.” Felix agreed with a big smile. “He’s an absolute show stealer.”

“Totally,” Hyunjin said, biting his bottom lip to contain his smile poorly.

Felix edged a little closer, his hands clasped in front of his pleated skirt bashfully. “I didn’t see you at first. I thought maybe…I dunno, I thought maybe you’d forgotten or something.”

Hyunjin rolled his eyes, thoroughly amused by the audacity of that statement. He reached out, giving Felix’s ear a little tug. “I could never forget you, Lix.”

God, he meant that in so many ways. Scary, big ways.

“Good.” Felix said with a smile, reaching out to tug his ear in return. “I’m glad.”

It was now or never. Hyunjin had to make his move or he’d talk himself out of it.

“Now how about a ride home?”

It came out sounding so much more confident than he actually was.

The blond blinked once, twice before a tentative smile bloomed on the corners of his lips. “Wait, really?”

Hyunjin nodded.

“Jin Jin, seriously?”

“I got a second helmet.” He said evenly, watching with amazement as Felix broke into a wide grin. It was somehow even bigger than the one he’d worn while performing. And goddammit, it was gorgeous.

“Oh my *god, yes!*” He jumped on his toes, clapping excitedly. “Let me just go grab my bag, okay? Oh my god, this is so exciting!”

Hyunjin chuckled and nodded as Felix bounded away, stopping by Changbin to excitedly tell him the news before racing off towards the locker room. It earned him an impressed eyebrow raise and a double thumbs up from the shorter man that Hyunjin didn’t really know how to respond to. So he merely smiled back and ducked his head, trying to avoid the bewildered stares he was getting.

Chapter End Notes

> The second helmet has landed!!! Next chapter? The ride AND sleep over Pt. 1! See you on Thursday! ❤□❤□❤□

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> Hello hello and happy Thursday! I don't know about you but this week has been FLYING by so far (not that I'm complaining). I want to give a big hug virtual hug to everyone who is reading, leaving comments, kudos and just being so incredibly supportive of me and this story. I couldn't ask for better readers, seriously. Thank you so much ❤□❤□❤□ ALRIGHT, we have two big things! The first motorcycle ride AND Sleepover Pt. 1! LET'S GOOOOO!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the look on Felix's face, you'd think Hyunjin had just handed him a piece of solid gold instead of a plain black helmet.

"Oh my god, oh my *god,*" Felix chirped excitedly, turning it this way and that in his little hands, admiring every angle. "Wait, is this my birthday present?"

Hyunjin froze. He'd completely forgotten that Felix's birthday was mere days away. He was the worst secret admirer on the face of the fucking planet. He had been so sure that his internal clock would ingest that date and store it at the forefront of his brain but *apparently* he had been distracted by school and friends and his crippling adoration.

"I-I uh, well-"

Felix tipped his head back and laughed. "Jinnie, it's fine. I'm just teasing."

"I mean, it *can* be. If you want. But full disclosure, my parents bought it, not me, so like…it wouldn't *technically* be from me."

Felix giggled, looking down at the helmet in his hands and shrugging. "You don't have to get me anything, Jin Jin. I just like hanging out with you."

That bashful little blush was back and Hyunjin was pretty sure it had more to do with Felix's words than the chill in the air.

"Alright, help me put this on!" Felix said suddenly, shaking his head

as if to clear out the softness left behind by his words.

Hyunjin took a deep breath and let it out slowly through his nose before smiling back. He took the helmet from his small hands and held it up over his head, pausing. “This isn’t gonna squish your ears, will it?”

The blond looked up and shrugged. “I mean yeah, but it won’t hurt if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Are you sure?”

The blond nodded. “Don’t worry Jin Jin, I’ll let you know if it’s uncomfortable.”

Satisfied by the answer, Hyunjin slowly and carefully pulled the helmet over Felix’s head, trying hard not to tug his hair or pinch his ears. He was so focused on the job at hand that it wasn’t until he was done that he found the blond smiling up at him, eyes crinkled at the corners in soft crescents.

“How’s that?” Hyunjin asked, hands still holding the sides of his helmet.

“Perfect.”

He nodded, pleased and threw his own helmet on with much less care and precision. “Okay, ready?”

“I think so?” Felix said, eyeing the bike with curiosity and perhaps a little apprehension. “I’ve never ridden on a motorcycle before though so I’m not sure.”

“Well just hold on tight and don’t fight it when we turn. Lean into it.” He advised as if he’d ever had a passenger before. “You’re safe with me, Lix. I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

It was a bold statement to make in a high school parking lot on a Friday afternoon but goddammit he meant it with all of his heart.

Felix blinked at him, looking almost a little stunned by his declaration before his eyes got all soft and melty again. “I know, Jinnie. I trust you.”

Hyunjin nodded dumbly, not sure how to really respond to that. So instead, he tightened the straps on his backpack before taking one

look at Felix's tiny cheer uniform and removing it entirely so he could take his leather jacket off.

"Here, put this on." He held out his jacket.

The blond's brow scrunched, looking perplexed even as he took it. "Jin, you don't have to-"

"It's for safety." He answered honestly. And yes, also the fringe benefit of seeing Felix swimming in his clothes and the way he left the scent of cheap, drug store peaches behind but *mostly* the safety thing.

Felix ducked his head, shrugging the too big jacket on. "Sure." He said lightly, with a little lilt that led Hyunjin to believe that perhaps he'd guessed at the other benefits too.

With Felix wrapped secretly in his jacket and helmet in place, Hyunjin flipped his visor down and straddled the bike, carefully pulling it up off its kickstand and balancing it. He patted the small sliver of space behind him. "Hop on."

He was so thankful for the visor covering his bright red face. He was literally shaking in his boots as Felix approached, eyeing the bike like he was looking for the best angle of attack. He started to lift his leg before pausing and assuring Hyunjin, "Oh, don't worry! I have spandex on under the skirt!"

Which did little to reassure him because holy shit, he hadn't thought about Felix spreading his legs in *a skirt.* Spreading his legs and straddling the bike and *pressed up against him.*

God dammit, how could it be simultaneously the best day of his life and also his last? He was going to die in the arms of an angel though, so he couldn't really complain. In fact, he might as well just full send it, if this truly was his last few minutes on this earth.

Felix settled in, feet automatically finding the little pegs to perch on and his arms shyly reaching up to grip Hyunjin's shoulders.

But that wouldn't do.

Because safety or whatever.

With one hand holding a handlebar, Hyunjin reached back and plucked those little fingers from his shoulder, drawing them down around his waist and tugging it tight. "Like this."

A barely there '*oh*' spilled from Felix's lips as his other hand followed suit, latching around Hyunjin like a little octopus and holding tight. "Like this." He repeated.

Hyunjin nodded and patted the hands laced over his stomach. God, he wished he'd done some sit ups or something before this. Note to self; work on abs seven days a week from here on out. If he survived, that was.

He twisted the key in the ignition, letting the bike rumble to life. He heard Felix squeal in excitement behind him and through all of his nerves and all of the bone melting sweetness of having your crush hold you tight, he remembered just how *fun* it was to ride with the wind in your hair. Metaphorically, but still.

He smiled under his vision and revved the engine just a little, twisting the throttle enough to give a satisfying roar and earning him another squeal from the blond.

He pulled out of the lot smoothly, feeling the eyes of his fellow students slide right off him. They must be awed. Stunned. Confused. And probably jealous.

His smile grew a little bigger as he turned out of the lot, Felix melting like water around the turn. He was a natural, pressing against Hyunjin and giggling so sweetly into his ear. It was the only thing Hyunjin could hear over the roar of the engine and it was intoxicating.

When he'd first gotten the bike, those shiny keys dropped into his palm by his grinning dad, he'd felt a weight lift off of him. He'd been running for years at that point, putting mile after mile on his running shoes in an attempt to outrun the crushing assumptions of his peers. To get away from the gnawing loneliness that ate at the edges of his heart. The echoing emptiness of his phone contacts list and his living room on Saturday nights and his memories of laughter filled summers.

He hadn't had a bad life. He wouldn't claim that. But it had felt lacking in so many ways.

But he could only run so much before his knees ached and he got shin splints. He couldn't run all day, from dawn to dusk, even if he wanted to. His body wouldn't allow it. But with his bike? He could.

He could get up early and ride all day if he wanted. As long as he had the money for gas and maybe some lunch, he was good. He could

leave it all behind, if only for a day. If only until it got dark and he needed to get home so his mom wouldn't worry.

His bike was freedom. It reminded him that someday, high school would end and he'd never have to look back. He could move forward to whatever that was going to look like. He really had no idea, but it had to be better.

Right?

But now, with Felix clinging to him, his tail safely wrapped around their waists, he caught himself sort of wishing that high school would never end.

He wanted this one moment to stretch on just a little bit longer. He wished the last three years had been like this, but he also knew that if it had, it wouldn't be as special as it was now.

He was getting close to the turn for Felix's house. The perfect little grid pattern of their town made it easy to know how to get somewhere after only a time or two. But he didn't want to drop Felix off yet. He didn't want to lose that heat pressed against his back, cradling him like he was special.

So he didn't turn. He didn't even ask, he just kept the bike moving, barralling past Felix's street.

And Felix shouted with joy, his arms going boa constrictor tight around his midsection as he rested his chin on Hyunjin's shoulder.

"Where are we going?" He yelled over the engine and the wind.

The taller boy shrugged his shoulder, raising and lowering Felix's head with it. "I don't know."

Felix giggled again, his tail flicking in excitement around them. "Okay!" He replied happily, wrapped in another laugh.

God, Hyunjin had been running from his loneliness for years. He'd been *chasing* a feeling of belonging but he'd *never* found it.

Until now.

He pushed the speed a little, still staying responsible but enough to elicit another shriek from his companion and he rocketed out of town. He kept going until it was just a speck in his mirrors. He turned off the

boring highway and onto a smaller, two lane road. Something with twists and turns and trees lining the sides that were painted the color of fire.

The wind tore through their little nature tunnel, making it rain autumn leaves and he could feel Felix unlooping on arm tentatively, trying to catch leaves as they sped down the road. A few moments later, he was wrapping it back around Hyunjin carefully, a fist full of leaves in his grasp.

Eventually, Hyunjin was well and truly lost but he didn't mind. He had a phone; they could find their way home when they were ready. So he rode even further until he felt something like a rumble against his back.

It took him a moment and a second rumble before it finally dawned on him. "Lix, are you hungry?" He shouted.

"A little." Felix confirmed, chin still perched on Hyunjin's shoulder like he was enjoying the scenery.

Hyunjin nodded, slowing down until he found a wide gravel shoulder to pull off on.

The silence was jarring when he turned the bike off. The only sound was the gravel crunching under his tires as he leaned the bike to the side, popping out the kickstand.

Felix stayed glued to his back until he tapped his leaf filled paws. "Hop off," he said softly, his voice sounding so loud in the sudden quiet of the forest.

Slowly, Felix's arms retracted and he awkwardly slid off the bike, nearly tumbling over. Hyunjin sprang after him, quickly pulling him back onto his feet before he could fall.

The blond giggled, looking up at Hyunjin and raising his visor so his shining eyes were visible. "My legs still feel all shaky from the bike." He giggled again, looking down at his naked legs like he expected to find them trembling.

"Yeah, the vibrations are pretty intense the first time." Hyunjin said, remembering how he'd felt the phantom shakes for hours after his first ride.

Felix nodded, carefully pulling his helmet off. His hair was a mess

underneath, ears nearly lost in a sea of blond tangles. But his face had this lovely pink rush to it and his makeup was starting to fade from the long day. Little freckles were starting to wink through like stars onto the night sky.

Hyunjin pulled his helmet off too, setting it on the seat before loosening the straps on his backpack and sliding it around to the front. He unzipped a side pocket and pulled out a granola bar.

“Here. I always pack a couple in case lunch isn’t enough.”

Felix took it eagerly, ripping open the wrapper and tearing off a chunk, holding the rest out to Hyunjin. “Split it with me? I don’t wanna eat the whole thing and ruin dinner.”

The taller boy wasn’t really very hungry but he agreed, more just liking the idea of sharing food than anything else.

They ate in silence, Hyunjin chewing thoughtfully and Felix eating like a starved animal beside him.

He unceremoniously brushed his fingers off on his jeans, hoping Felix wasn’t grossed out by it only to find the blond boldly hollowing out his cheeks and sucking his own fingers clean.

Good god, what was Hyunjin supposed to do with that mental image?

So instead, he distracted himself by holding his hands out. “Here. Let me help with those.” He nodded his head toward Felix’s fistful of leaves and the blond complied, gently unclenching his hand and letting them flutter into Hyunjin’s.

Silently, Hyunjin sat his backpack on the dusty gravel, crouching down to pull out his heaviest text book: Science.

He opened it in the very middle, splitting it evenly as he carefully placed the leaves on the page. He jigsawed them together, making sure they stayed clear of edges.

“What are you doing?”

His voice was closer than expected and when Hyunjin looked up, he found Felix *right there.* He’d crouched next to Hyunjin, ears perked up into perfect little intrigued triangles as he stared curiously at what Hyunjin was doing.

“I’m pressing them. It’ll keep them safe.”

Felix hummed lowly, eyes glued to the simple process.

“Do you…wanna help?” Hyunjin asked nervously, flicking his eyes up as he held out the last bright orange leaf to Felix.

The blond nodded, taking the stem carefully between his thumb and index finger like it would shatter if he moved too fast. He slowly added it to the page, patting it lightly like he was wishing it a good night.

“Can we add more?” Felix asked, voice quiet.

The brunette nodded. “We can add as many as you like.”

What he didn’t expect was for Felix to run off, collecting leaves like a mad man. He acted like fallen leaves were currency and he was hellbent on retiring by the end of the night. He brought back more and more fistfulls, even trying to climb a tree to grab a lingering green one before Hyunjin had to physically pull him down, begging him to stay on the ground.

Felix had thankfully complied, chittering excitedly and chasing the leaves as the gentle wind blew them away from him.

He brought Hyunjin bright poppy yellows and sumptuous burgundies. Deep oranges and cherry red. He even brought a few dried up brown ones that he’d dug down to find, saying he didn’t want them to ‘feel left out’.

By the time Felix skidded to a halt, breathing heavily and tail whipping excitedly from his play session, Hyunjin had more leaves in his book than pages. He had a feeling if he asked Felix what he was going to do with them, he wouldn’t be able to tell you. But it didn’t matter because he’d had fun and was staring at Hyunjin with such naked happiness that it was already worth it.

Carefully, Hyunjin slid his textbook back in his bag and zipped it up. “I guess I should get you home.” He finally admitted, pulling out his phone to google where the fuck they actually were. “I wouldn’t want your parents to worry.”

Felix hummed, fingers tapping a little rhythm on his helmet where it rested next to Hyunjin's. “Would you maybe wanna meet my parents sometime?”

The taller boy stopped, finger hovering over the search button, suddenly completely blank as to what it was he was doing.

Felix's parents?

The people who had given this perfect being life? The people who loved him and protected him and probably wanted nothing bad to ever happen to him? The people who might take one look at Hyunjin with his shaved head and motorcycle and eyebrow piercing and demand he never set foot near their son again?

"I-I uh…yeah. Maybe. Some time. But not tonight." He flinched at his awkward delivery but it was true. "I uh…I don't necessarily look very presentable." He gestured down to his dusty boots and the gray dirt from the gravel covering his knees.

Felix nodded but shrugged. "You look great to me. But okay, some other time then."

Hyunjin desperately wished he had his helmet on with that handy visor that covered his blushes and made him look cool and untouchable instead of the absolute softie, crybaby he was. Because yeah, he was tearing up but if Felix asked it was totally just because of all the dust or pollen or something.

He focused on finally searching his address, knowing that if he made it close enough he'd be able to get Felix home easily. Thankfully, he hadn't taken too many turns so it was a fairly straight shot once he made it back to the main road. He repeated the directions a few times in his head before shoving his phone back in his pocket and grabbing his helmet.

"Ready, Lix?"

The blond grabbed his helmet with great enthusiasm. "Ready!"

"Is the helmet comfy? Doesn't it hurt your ears?" Hyunjin asked, climbing onto the bike and waiting for the pure bliss that was Felix wrapped around him.

"It's fine." Felix assured him, gingerly climbing on the bike that seemed just far too big for him. "Could use some pizazz though. Do you think I put stickers on it? Or glitter-*wait!* Jin Jin, can I add rhinestones? *Pleaaasse* tell me I can add rhinestones?"

Hyunjin laughed. The helmet was supposed to be an available second

helmet, not *necessarily* Felix's. But honestly, he loved the idea of Felix taking ownership. "You can add rhinestones." He said with a laugh.

The engine nearly drowned out Felix's cry of victory but he still heard it. He flipped his visor down and reached behind him to pull Felix's arms around him. It was funny how the anonymity of the visor made him feel more confident. Almost like if Felix couldn't see his face, he wouldn't know how helplessly in love he was.

He eased out of the gravel, careful on the uneven surface. But soon enough they were back on the pavement, Felix's chin resting on his shoulder.

Everything felt right like this. It felt like fate.

Perhaps Hyunjin was a romantic and perhaps he was helpless but god, it felt like the universe wouldn't make two people fit together so perfectly if it wasn't on purpose. Coincidences existed but he didn't think he and Felix were one.

They felt purposeful. The way the blond held him without a second thought or a tremor of nerves, the way he swayed into turns with complete trust, the way the tip of his tail was calm and peaceful? That was by design.

Hyunjin was convinced.

The ride back felt shorter than their freefall out of town and all too soon, he was pulling up to the curb outside Felix's house.

He shut the bike off, leaning it onto its kickstand as he flipped his visor up. Felix slid off the bike, a little more practiced this time and looking very proud of himself when he didn't nearly faceplant on the pavement this time.

"Thanks for the ride, Jin Jin." Felix said, wrestling his helmet back off and propping it under his arm like Hyunjin did. The difference being that Felix wasn't as lanky as him and the helmet looked almost comically big propped against his hip like that.

"Anytime." Hyunjin said with a smile. "You're a good passenger."

The blond preened at the praise. "Yeah? Best passenger you've ever had?"

"*Only.* So yes." Hyunjin said.

“Only?” Felix looked *very* happy at this revelation. “Well then…I’m honored.”

Hyunjin didn’t know how to respond. He merely bit his lip, trying to quell all the rumbling emotions that were exploding under his skin. He felt so full of life. He felt like he could run a marathon, fight a bear and win. He felt unstoppable.

“I’ll see you at the sleepover tomorrow?” Felix asked, taking a step back but not turning away from Hyunjin yet.

To be honest, the brunette had completely forgotten that was happening tomorrow evening but he was suddenly so grateful for a ready-made excuse to see Felix already built into his weekend. “Of course.”

Felix’s smile brightened. “Okay. Well then…see you soon.” He took another step back and as he started to turn, Hyunjin called out.

“Hey Lix?”

“Yeah?” Felix whirled around, eyes round and eager.

“Don’t tell Jisung about the second helmet. Otherwise, he’ll want a ride and I think Minho would kill me.”

Those round eyes blinked a few times in rapid succession before the blond doubled over in laughter. “O-oh, oh my god, he totally would! Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me!”

Hyunjin smiled, chuckling a little at Felix’s bright laugh. He offered a tiny wave as Felix waved with his whole arm, still giggling under his breath as he finally disappeared inside his house.

The brunette sat for a good minute, trying to calm the electricity in his blood.

Every time he pushed a little closer, Felix only ever took a step towards him. Suddenly, all the nerves he had about the sleep over tomorrow dissolved into something lighter. Something like excitement.

This was going to be fun.

*****

Hyunjin turned his bike off in front of Chan's the next day, wondering if it was too late to back out.

The excitement he'd cultivated while hanging out with Felix on that magical afternoon had soured slowly after he'd gotten home. His parents had lightly grilled him about why he was home so much later than usual. But the *second* he mentioned going on a ride with Felix, the questions would not *end*.

Did he have fun? Did *Felix* have fun? Did the helmet squish his ears? Had Hyunjin been driving responsibly? Where did they go? Did Felix need proper riding gear? Did he need a leather jacket? Perhaps one with some lovely embroidery on it?

"Let *me* get him a birthday gift first before you start piling more stuff on him!" Hyunjin had exclaimed only to be met with more questions about Felix's birthday.

Was he having a party? Was Hyunjin invited? What was he going to get him? Did Felix want a cake? What was his favorite flavor?

If Hyunjin hadn't already shaved his head, he was certain he would have pulled all his hair out during that conversation. He fucking loved his parents but goddamn, he'd never witnessed them reacting to one of his friends before. Because he'd never *had* a friend before but still, as adorable as it was, it was *exhausting*.

He had escaped upstairs, claiming a need for a shower before dinner. But where he'd thought the warm water would help to wash away all the tension of trying to figure out what to get Felix for his birthday, instead it wrapped around his body like a lover. Aching and warm as he remembered the way the blond had melted into him. He remembered the smell of peaches that clung to his jacket and the feel of those strong fingers gripping his waist, pulling him close, looking to *him* for safety.

He groaned, refusing to look down as he inevitably got hard. He felt ashamed, like he was betraying Felix in a way. Like he was tainting the purity of his love.

But oh, his body wanted less pure things. His mind could imagine so many impure things.

He shoved the handle of the shower over aggressively, dousing himself

with cold water. He needed to *behave.* After all, Felix was an angel and sinners didn't get to heaven.

Hyunjin finished the shower quickly after that, shivering and miserable but oddly proud of his forced self control. He might have been a helpless mess in love but if nothing else, he could *not* masturbate to his crush. It was probably the bare minimum but it was about the best he could manage.

He'd eaten dinner, fielded more questions about the impending Saturday night sleep over and ascended the stairs once more with his mind reeling.

He'd shut the door quietly and proceeded to face plant into his bed, letting out a long, cathartic groan. Having friends was hard. Having a crush was delightful and wonderful and also sort of low key torture.

When sleep didn't take him, he'd slowly rolled off his bed and grabbed his backpack, dragging it over to his desk. One thing that never failed to make him tired was working on homework.

So he'd pulled out his folders and books only to watch a dirty brown leaf drift out between two pages of his science book.

He'd slowly peeled it open, revealing all the leaves he'd carefully pressed for Felix. He'd stared at them, the wheels in his mind starting to turn over and over again, ideas bubbling under the surface.

Homework would have to wait. He had a birthday present to make.

So here he was, running on four hours of sleep and realizing he couldn't sneak away because Jisung had clearly heard the sound of his bike based on the way he was trying to sneakily peek through the curtains.

With a resigned sigh, Hyunjin got himself off the bike, his small duffle filled with neatly folded clothes, a toothbrush and the carefully wrapped present he'd made for Felix. He wasn't sure if he'd have the time and privacy to give it to him like he wanted but his chances were better here than a crowded hallway between classes.

He ascended the steps to the front of Chan's house, fist raised to knock when the solid wood door flung open to reveal a beaming Jisung wearing glittery gold under eye masks.

"Hyunjinnie! You made it! Oh my god, did you bring your nail polish?

I brought some just in case-”

“Ya, Jiji let him breathe!”

Minho was standing behind him, arms crossed and eyes rolling in fond exasperation even as they were underlined with the same shiny eye masks. He looked entirely too serious to be wearing a cat headband to push his bangs back but alas, here was, doing just that.

“Both of you! Get out of the way so he can come in!” Chan came jogging over, pushing them aside and gesturing Hyunjin inside with an apologetic smile.

“Sorry about that, I promise I’m a better host than this.”

“It’s fine.” Hyunjin said with what he hoped was a reassuring smile. Sometimes he felt like Chan was truly just a forty year old man trapped in an eighteen year old's body. He acted like he paid a mortgage and had back pain from an old sports injury or something.

And then, like the elderly woman that Hyunjin secretly was, he took a look around the foyer and said, “Your home is gorgeous. Is the crown molding original?”

Jesus Christ, he should never be let out of his home. Someone lock the door and throw away the key.

Chan laughed, rubbing the back of his neck and looking up, following Hyunjin’s line of sight. “I’m not sure but you sound like Lix.”

“Lixie knows what crown molding is?” Surprisingly, this was a hard trait to find in other young men and *apparently* it was *exactly* Hyunjin’s type.

He heard a giggle behind him and suddenly remembered Jisung and Minho from earlier.

Jisung was smiling broadly, his eyes scrunched up in perfect little crescents while Minho watched with a smug little smirk that somehow still looked friendly.

“Lixieeee! Your boyfriend is here and he knows what crown modeling is or whatever!” Jisung cried, laughing even harder when Hyunjin’s soul left his body.

“I-I, I-I’m not, his, h-his-”

“Jinnie? Jin Jin, you know what crown molding is?”

The blond appeared behind Jisung, eyes wide and disbelieving and his freckled cheeks tinted the same light pink as his silky pajamas.

But Hyunjin was unable to process words or speak them so he merely stared in shock and horror as the love of his life pushed past Jisung like a giggle harbinger of *doom.*

Chan laughed, clapping Hyunjin on the shoulder like he was trying to keep him from fully floating away. “He asked if it’s original?”

Felix looked positively relieved as he lunged forward, taking Hyunjin’s hand in both of his and holding it like he was about to make a declaration.

“Don’t worry, I asked the same thing in sixth grade. Chan’s mom said it is.”

Hyunjin gasped.

“*And,* it’s never even been *painted!*” Felix said excitedly.

“Shut *up,* that’s impossible!” If there was one thing that could revive Hyunjin, it was interior design apparently.

Minho cackled, arm thrown over Jisung’s shoulder as he started to swagger away, pulling the shorter brunette with him. “Tell me you’re gay without telling me you’re gay.”

Felix giggled and the sound shattered any remaining fear around Hyunjin’s heart. Sure, Jisung had brazenly called him Felix’s boyfriend and no, it wasn’t true. He was pretty sure he’d know if it was. But Felix hadn’t decided to correct him so…that had to mean *something,* right?

Feeling emboldened, Hyunjin used Felix’s grip on his hand to pull the blond closer into a hug. He heard a surprised little yelp but there were instantly arms wrapped around his waist and a fluffy tail following.

He reached up briefly to squeeze his ear, scratching the base for just a moment. “Hey Lixie.”

Felix, as per usual, shoved his ear back into Hyunjin’s palm, craving a few more scratches. “Hey, Jin Jin.”

God *damn,* he was so fucking cute.

“You two are cute together.”

Once again, Hyunjin was surprised to find another living human in a house *full* of other humans.

He let Felix go and took a small step back, doing his best not to feel the blond’s pout like an arrow through the heart.

But Felix clung to his hand, gripping it with both of his little ones. “Aren’t we?”

He preened, making a kissy face like he was posing for a selfie and Hyunjin froze, looking vaguely sick, also like how he would pose for a selfie.

Chan laughed and rolled his eyes before stepping in to take the bag out of Hyunjin’s hand. “Come on. Let’s set these down and I can introduce you to my parents real quick.”

Hyunjin swallowed thickly but nodded. And maybe Felix could feel his nerves or maybe he had a hunch based on everything Hyunjin had shared with him or something because he gave Hyunjin’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

Hyunjin squeezed his fingers back, thankful for whatever his reasoning was. He didn’t have a lot of experience with parents but he worried they’d regard him the same way teachers and convenience store clerks would: with narrowed eyed distrust.

Chan leaned into a massive living room, dropping Hyunjin’s bag by the door and waving to the group already piled on the couch. “Hyunnie is here! We’re gonna say hey to the parents and then I’ll bring him right back!”

“You better! My cuticles need *help*.” Jeongin moaned, looking sullenly at his nails. Immediately, Jisung was squawking about how he got to go first before Changbin shyly asked what a cuticle was.

They walked away to the fading sound of Minho’s disappointment in Binnie’s lack of nail knowledge.

They walked down the hall until they reached the end. Chan nudged the cracked door open and peaked his head in. “Hey guys, you have a second?”

Hyunjin heard a shuffling behind the door and a soft, “Of course

honey, what's up?"

The sliver in between the door and the jamb widened as Chan pushed it open, stepping in and ushering Hyunjin inside.

He followed on wooden legs, a pitter patter in his heart that felt pathetic and nervous and god, he was an adult. This shouldn't scare him so much.

"Mom, dad, this is Hyunjin. My new friend."

My new friend.

Friend.

Well shit. He'd known it, sure. But to have it said in such plain words? How was Hyunjin supposed to process that? How was he supposed to really absorb it?

He felt a squeeze to his fingers again and suddenly remembered the small blond attached to it. The soft press of that skin, the silent encouragement, pushed his croaky voice out.

"P-pleasure to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Bang. You have a l-lovely home."

Please like me. Please don't tell Chan I can't stay. Please don't think I'm a bad kid, I'm not. I'm really not, I promise.

"Jinnie knows what crown molding is and he was *stunned* that it's never been painted, Mrs. Ji-Sue!"

Like a knight in pink pajamas, Felix swooped in. He gripped onto Hyunjin's arm and smiled up at him, lavishing his seal of approval all over him for everyone to see.

"Is that right?" Mrs. Bang said with a gentle smile. "And did you tell him that it's original?"

"Yes ma'am." Hyunjin said, feeling his shoulders drop ever so slightly as he attempted a small smile in return. "It's hard to find old trim like that that hasn't been painted over."

"Tell me about it. Ji-Sue said no to *three* other houses before this one because of that very reason." Chan's father leaned against the post of their bed with a warm, friendly smile.

Mrs. Bang rolled her eyes playfully. “That was only the reason for the second one. The first one needed all new flooring and the third one would have required us scraping wallpaper off of every wall, in every room. *Whilst I was six months pregnant!*”

Mr. Bang just rolled his eyes in retaliation but there was no heat to it.

Chan chuckled and it was easy to see where he’d gotten his easy going, get along with anyone attitude. His gene pool was rife with it on *both* sides, it seemed.

“Alright, well I just wanted to introduce you real quick but I need to go feed Seungmin before he gets too hungry.”

“I’ve never seen someone so filled with rage as a hungry Seungminnie,” Felix whispered, sounding haunted.

Chan’s parents nodded heartily and shooed them away with lovely little ‘nice to meet you’s and ‘have fun’s and Hyunjin had waved like a grade schooler, letting Lixie pull him from the room and back to the living room.

That had gone well. Very well.

Perhaps it was time to stop deciding how things would go before they even happened. He didn’t want to create self fulfilling prophecies of doom and gloom. What if he tried for manifestation of something positive?

They made their way back to the sunken living room, decked out in a million and one throw pillows and blankets, everyone already in full rot mode: pajamas and sweats. Suddenly, Hyunjin felt overdressed in his jeans and t-shirt.

“I uh, where’s the bathroom?” He asked Chan quietly, dipping to the side to grab his bag. “I’m going to get changed.”

“Oh hallway, but turn right instead of left. First door on the right.”

Hyunjin nodded and slipped away. He pulled on a clean t-shirt and some soft sweatpants before throwing on an oversized zip up hoodie. He tended to run cold so it was the safer bet. He stood, staring into the mirror and breathing deeply. He found the fringes of that excitement he’d cultivated the day prior and grasped onto it greedily.

Tonight was supposed to be *fun.* He really shouldn’t stress so much

about fun.

With a final nod, he pulled his huge pouch of nail products out of his bag and replaced it with his neatly folded clothes.

He walked back down the hall with as much confidence as he could muster, hearing the bickering over pizza toppings getting louder and louder. He rounded the corner, took a deep breath, held up his bag of polish and asked, “Alright! Who’s first?”

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“Come *on,* Minnie! You’re just going to do black? That’s so *booooring.”* Jisung whined, half hanging off the couch and flailing wildly.

“Black is classic and it goes with everything.” Minho said evenly, watching with intense focus as Hyunjin’s brush spread polish over his nail in even coats.

“Yeah sure but so do teddy bears!” Jisung said, showing off his nails decked out in little bears for the ninth time in the last ten minutes.

“I’m glad you like them.” Hyunjin said with a smile, neck still bent over Minho’s hand.

After the pizza had been devoured, it was decided that the order of Hyunjin’s clients would be decided by an arm wrestling competition. Naturally, Changbin had won. Chan probably would have secured second pretty easily but he had graciously agreed to go last. Jisung secured second place by kicking his opponent in the shin under the table. Minho had swooped in to secure third place and Felix had loitered behind, not sure if he was ready to part with his pretty pastel bunny nails just yet. Seungmin had lost to Jeongin and before Hyunjin knew it, he had a full schedule.

Felix had whined that it wasn’t fair to make him work so hard on his first sleep over but Hyunjin had insisted he didn’t mind. Because truly, he didn’t. Painting nails was one of his hobbies. And, if he was being honest, a little piece of him felt like this was helping him earn his invite to this sleep over. Otherwise, what did he have to offer? It surely wasn’t his quick wit or sparkling personality.

So instead, he hunched over short, blunt nails, pushing their cuticles back with oils and orangewood sticks before layering on paint and designs and adding cutesy little stickers and gems.

Changbin had opted for a surprisingly demure mauve color, his only instruction being “make me look expensive”. So Hyunjin had added little gold flecks of glitter overlay and added his best approximation of gold filigree design. He thought it was just okay but Changbin had stared at it in awe for a solid five minutes once he was done.

Jisung had a messy camera roll full of screenshots and wild ideas that probably included pyrotechnics and colors that didn’t even fucking *exist.* So Hyunjin had given him a different bright color on each finger with mixing, clashing patterns and even gone as far as to cover most of his ring finger in rhinestones.

And now here was Minho, asking for basic black and being shamed from the couch by his childhood sweetheart.

Chan was playing some fighting game with Jeongin, Seungmin and Binnie while Felix had just snuck back with a pizza crust to gnaw on. He dropped down to the floor, laying on his stomach next to Hyunjin to carefully observe his work. He was quiet and polite, munching on his pizza crust and scooting closer to Hyunjin every few seconds.

The taller boy wasn’t sure what to do about that so he just focused on the work at hand and making sure each customer left happy.

When he finished the top coat on Minho’s, he instructed him to not touch anything for the next ten minutes and then sat up to stretch out his back. He carefully stretched his cramping hand before looking for the next in line.

But before he could call Jeongin over, he felt a little hand land on his shoulder and looked over to see Felix staring at the way he massaged his hand. “Does your hand hurt?”

He shrugged. “A little. It starts to cramp after so long holding that little brush.”

Felix nodded before sitting up on his haunches. “I bet. Why don’t you take a break then?”

“Aw, I’ll be fine. I can-”

“We have all night, Jin Jin.” Felix said with a smile, using his new

nickname. “Come on, take a break and cuddle for a little bit!”

“O-okay.” Hyunjin said, completely unprepared for that line of attack.

He did not realize that cuddle meant on the couch with not only Felix but Binnie and Jisung too. But he was pulled into a puddle of men and had to admit, it was nice and warm in there so he didn’t really mind it.

That and Felix’s fingers had snaked their way between his own, massaging his hand in little circular motions.

“Does this help?” He asked quietly, head leaning on Hyunjin’s shoulder.

He hummed, tempted to just lean his head over on top of Felix’s. The pizza was starting to settle in his tummy and he was warm and his aching body was finally pressed into a plush couch with the white noise of laughter around him. He thought perhaps heaven would look a lot like Chan’s living room on a Saturday night.

“Ay, don't go falling asleep! It's not even 9 pm yet!” Seungmin yelled from across the room.

“Looks like someone might finally steal the crown from our Lixie,” Jeongin teased, narrowly missing the pillow thrown at him.

“Shut up!” Felix yelled, suddenly standing and scowling as Jeongin giggled on the floor.

“What?! It's just the truth! You *always* pass out first!”

Felix's scowl had his ears flattening, his tail eerily still and his muscles tensing. If Hyunjin wasn't mistaken, all these signs usually led up to-

Felix *pounced,* landing in a heap on top of Jeongin and digging his little claws into his sides.

“S-stop! Lix, s-stop, it *tickles!”*

“Respect your elders!” Felix said with an evil laugh, his tail starting to whip around in excitement.

Chan was giggling and Seungmin wasn't doing much better, even as Jeongin called for help.

And Changbin, god his laugh was drowning them all out and even as

Minho begged him to stop, Hyunjin had to admit, he sort of loved it. He found himself giggling too, under his breath and then just out loud at the sheer pandemonium that was Felix in a tickle fight.

Eventually, Jeongin was able to escape and Felix sassily rejoined Hyunjin on the couch, evidently very proud of his victory.

“Don't listen to them, Jin Jin. Just cause I fall asleep earlier doesn't mean I'm boring.”

Hyunjin blinked a few times, confused. Had *that* been Felix's worry?

“I mean, one look at you and it's clear who's getting the most beauty sleep around here.”

Felix froze before giggling riotously and throwing his legs over Hyunjin's lap and flinging his arms around him. He leaned forward, rubbing his temples against Hyunjin's shoulders over and over. Marking him with his affection.

Hyunjin sat very still, trying to drink every moment of it. He swore to god he could *feel* a distant purr rumbling somewhere deep inside of Felix.

He gently brought his arm up, settling his hand on the blond’s shoulders. A barely there way of begging him not to go.

“Do you think you sleeping more might have something to do with your kitten side?” Hyunjin mused, more to himself than anything else.

But the blond paused in his rubs, his eyes looking skyward like the answer was written on the ceiling.

“I mean yeah, probably,” He mused in return. “I mean, I’ve always gotten sleepy easily. And it feels like I take more naps than other people.”

Hyunjin chuckled. “Cat naps,” He whispered.

Felix giggled and poked him in the side. But when the blond’s giggle died out, Hyunjin realized the stillness of the room. Pulling his gaze away from the blond under his arm, he looked up to find Chan *beaming* from the doorway, carrying an armful of replacement sodas. Jisung and Minho were giggling and whispering behind their hands, eyes alight and resting on the other pair.

Even Changbin's laugh had settled into something still on his face. This joyful smile that had him biting his bottom lip in a futile effort to contain.

"Jin Jin, *pets,*" Felix whined, plucking Hyunjin's hand off his shoulder and shoving it at his fluffy ear instead.

Hyunjin could feel the blush creeping up his neck but what was he going to do? *Say no?*

He started stroking the soft fur at the base of his ear, the fluff that melted into his long, silky blond hair.

And slowly, the room started to move around them again. Hyunjin stayed quiet, enjoying the warmth of Felix's body pressed into his side and the little flicks his ears gave, like they were pleased with all the attention.

He tried not to melt into the couch too much but Felix was so warm and he thought with him here, he might not even need his hoodie anymore.

He felt a little bad that he wasn't socializing more. Not that that had ever been his strong suit but wasn't he supposed to be bonding with people or like, making memories with *everyone*?

So a half hour later, when Chan started collecting their grease stained paper plates, roping Seungmin into helping, Hyunjin offered to help.

The three of them carried the empty cans and forgotten pizza crusts to the kitchen, tossing them in the trash. Hyunjin turned to leave when he heard Seungmin behind him.

"I've never seen Lix let *anyone* touch his ears. His parents maybe? But that's it."

Hyunjin turned back around slowly, unsure what Seungmin's tone meant. And when he looked at him, his face gave no clues away either. He spoke very straight forward, like he had no ulterior motive or hidden meaning but Hyunjin had never been good at catching that stuff anyways.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

“Me neither.” Chan said, eyes friendly in a way that made Hyunjin think this made him happy.

He stood, nervously lacing and unlacing his fingers. He wasn’t sure what to say.

“Lix really likes you.” Seungmin said, his tone still mysterious in its baseness.

“I-I really like him too.” Hyunjin said before his eyes widened in shock at his own words. He was about to hurriedly clarify that he meant *like a friend* but god, he *hated* lying and he wasn’t very good at it and they’d probably be able to fucking *smell* the dishonesty on him and-

“Good.” Seungmin said, a barely there smile starting to tug at the corner of his lips. “Then you better not hurt him.”

“I-I would *never, ever ever ever-”*

“Whoa there, calm down,” Chan said, laying a hand on Hyunjin’s shoulder with a little laugh before turning to Seungmin with the world’s most gentle frown. “And you. Behave.”

Seungmin just put his hands up in the air, his smile widening.

When they finally went to leave the kitchen, Seungmin reached out, giving Hyunjin one of those friendly punches to the arm that nearly had the taller boy getting teary eyed. Had the terrifying Seungmin, king of sarcasm and the hundred yard stare actually just accepted him?

He’d offered an embarrassing, wobbly smile back and followed them back to the living room.

*****

After several rounds of Mario Party and cold pizza and way too much soda, the boys finally started to drop, one by one.

Felix had indeed fought valiantly but had been the first to fall asleep. He was nestled in the corner of the couch, hugging his tail and using it as a pillow in a way that was utterly *destroying* Hyunjin.

It was too cute. Too *fucking cute.*

Binnie had curled up on the other end of the couch, making himself impossibly small for how beefy he was. Chan had passed out dad style, in the big, plush recliner.

Seungmin and Jeongin had curled up on an air mattress that Chan's dad had dragged out.

Minho had fallen asleep sprawled on Jisung's lap and Jisung was sitting ramrod straight, afraid to breathe. Back against the couch, he'd been staring down at Minho in complete silence for nearly five minutes by the time Hyunjin just couldn't take it any more.

"You know he likes you too, right?" He said softly. He *knew* it wasn't his place but god damn, it was fucking *painful* to watch these two make heart eyes across the lunch table every day. Just the *knowledge* that this had been happening for *years* was killing Hyunjin. He couldn't imagine growing up having to *watch* it like the other boys.

He imagined that normally, Jisung would have jumped to his feet or whirled around or something but because of his lapful of Minho, he stayed perfectly still. A rarity for the brunette. So Hyunjin just watched the way his spine stiffened, his shoulders tensing up closer to his ears.

"W-what? I don't know what you're talking about. I don't l-like him. Like, I mean, like, I don't like him *like that.*"

"Jisung…" Hyunjin said, feeling his own nerves dampened by his sleepiness.

"I-I *can't* like him like that." Jisung said quietly.

The room was silent besides the dull roar of the T.V. playing some late night game show in syndication. The overhead lights had been turned off by Chan's mom when she'd walked by earlier. She'd given Hyunjin the most gentle smile before her eyes took in the room. She'd turned the light off and left with a silent little wave of the hand and a whispered *Good night.*

So now the room was filled with nothing but deep breathing and the two of them facing the glowing T.V. because it was easier to have this conversation without looking at each other.

"Why not?" Hyunjin asked, keeping his voice quiet.

“Becasue,” Jisung said, sounding scared. “He’s my *best* friend, Hyunnie.”

The taller boy watched as Jisung’s head tilted down, eyes most likely roaming over Minho’s sleeping face.

He wondered if he was running his fingers through his hair softly. He hoped he was.

“He can still be your best friend and be something more too.” Hyunjin said, like he had literally any experience in this department.

Jisung was silent for a few long seconds, eyes looking down at the man in his lap. “But what if it makes it weird? Or what if he doesn’t feel the same?”

“Oh, he does. Trust me.” Hyunjin said without hesitation.

“How could you know that?” Jisung asked, his head finally lifting as he twisted ever so slightly to glance over his shoulder. Not *at* Hyunjin but in his general direction. “Did he…say something?”

Hyunjin shrugged. “Not exactly but he doesn’t have to. It’s about the way he looks at you.”

Jisung giggled. “Lix said you were a romantic but *damn* Jinnie, you’re sappy as fuck, aren’t you?”

Hyunjin felt that familiar feeling of shame creep up in him, the tide rising quickly before Jisung added, “It’s not a bad thing. I like it, honestly.”

He sighed, his head falling back against the couch as he stared at the ceiling. “I wish I could have that kind of optimism.” He muttered, sounding far away.

“You do. About everything else.” Hyunjin said. “What’s so different about Minho?”

“Everything.” Jisung said. Somehow his voice sounded both dreamy and devastated. Wistful and hopeful and so very timid.

“When I was little, I used to have really bad social anxiety. I could hardly leave the house. Even the grocery store or the park would send me into a total meltdown.”

Hyunjin sat, listening. He would never have thought someone like

Jisung would struggle to be around people. He was a social butterfly, the life of the party. It was hard to imagine him small and scared, hiding behind his parents legs.

“I spent a lot of time in my room, alone.” Jisung said, staring at the ceiling. “I’d play guitar and sing and write songs and stuff and it was fun but I mean…it still got lonely, ya know? So one day, I’m playing my guitar, nothing good or anything and my window is open and I hear someone outside. Someone talking to me. So I look out my window and there’s this other boy, hanging out the window of *his* bedroom and asking me if I can play it again.”

Hyunjin could *hear* the smile in his voice.

“So I did. And then he asked me to play it again. And then again. And then I started singing with it. And then *he* started to sing with it. And by the time my dad called me down to dinner, I felt a lot less lonely.”

Hyunjin smiled softly, the origin story of these two making his heart ache in the most beautiful way.

“The next day, he knocked on my door. Asked my mom if I could come out and play.” He laughed a little, the sound not much more than a dry chuckle, a million miles away, buried in the memory. “I still remember the look of *shock* on her face when I said yes.”

He shook his head slowly. “But with Minho? I knew nothing bad would ever happen as long as I had him.”

Who would have thought that it would be *Minho* to introduce Han Jisung to the world. Of all people, the black cat pulled the golden retriever out to play.

“I can’t lose that.” Jisung said softly, his voice a quiet secret to the ceiling. “I can’t lose *him.”*

“But what if you didn’t?” Hyunjin dared to ask. “What if you got *more*?”

Jisung let out a long, labored sigh. “It just…seems too good to be true.”

Hyunjin nodded, feeling Felix shift next to him and perfectly empathizing with what Jisung was saying. He and Felix didn’t have the same history that those two did but still. Hyunjin was already paralysed with fear at the very *thought* of losing the connection they

shared. He couldn't imagine the weight it would carry after nearly a lifetime to grow.

The smaller brunette sighed again before a yawn pulled its way out of him. He adjusted, getting more comfortable against the couch like he was prepared to destroy his back and sleep sitting up if it meant he'd keep Minho close.

"Well, for whatever it's worth, when I asked Minho if you were seeing someone he told me you were off limits."

There was a long pause before, "He did?"

Hyunjin hummed his affirmation, a little smile tugging at his lips.

"Wait," Jisung said through another yawn. "Why did you ask Minho if I was seeing someone?"

"Oh, I was trying to see how he felt about you." Hyunjin said it like it was a completely normal thing to admit.

Jisung snorted sleepily. "Such a fucking romantic." He said it so fondly that Hyunjin didn't feel that old rush of fear and embarrassment. Instead, he simply leaned into it.

"Yeah. That's me."

"I like it." Jisung said, voice starting to drift off.

So Hyunjin merely uttered a small thank you and let the other boy slip under the waves of sleep. In only a few minutes, he was sliding down onto the floor, Minho moving with him as if on instinct. He watched as they effortlessly stayed tangled, their arms reaching for each other even in sleep.

It was just as his own eyes were starting to grow heavy that Hyunjin felt Felix shift beside him. He glanced over to find the blond's eyes lazily opening, just a little bit. He seemed more asleep than awake but his head rolled to the side to find Hyunjin.

He sat up, looking so incredibly small as he hugged his tail.

"Jin Jin," He said, voice heavy with sleep. "Can I cuddle?"

Hyunjin nodded dumbly, unable to make any words with his stupid mouth. So he merely opened his arms, making his entire body a blank canvas for Felix to paint with snuggles.

A happy little chitter sounded from the blond as he uncurled himself only to curl right back up on Hyunjin's lap. Just like a cat.

His tail curved back around, the blond using it as a pillow to cushion his head. He was too big to really fit on Hyunjin's lap but he tried his best and it had Hyunjin melting into the cushions, lightheaded at the fact that Felix was apparently a lap cat.

"Is this okay or is it too much?" Felix asked, peeking up from behind the fluff of his tail nervously.

"Never too much," Hyunjin said softly. He reached out to scratch his ears, earning him a slow smile and a slow blink before the blond hunkered back down in his tail.

"Lixie is a good kitten?" He asked, voice barely there.

Hyunjin had to bite his lip to hold in his besotted little whimper. "Lixie is the *best* kitten." He assured him, letting his fingers weave in and out of his long hair.

Felix's sigh drifted into a purr. A low rumble that shook Hyunjin's bones. It was deep and soft and probably the world's best sound.

That purr mixed with the silver light of the T.V., the warmth of his lap cat and the room filled with deep, even breathing, lulled Hyunjin to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

> Little baby Minsung origin story 🥺🥺🥺 And THE FIRST PURR!!! HYUNJIN HAS FINALLY DONE IT!!! Alright, we'll continue with the sleepover in the next chapter, starting with probably one of the most ridiculous scenes I've ever written See you on Sundayyyy!!!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> Hi, hello and good morning (or afternoon or evening or middle of the night, depending where you are)! We're back with the sleepover, pt. 2, return of the sleepover! Thank you so much for all the love you've been pouring onto this story ❤ I can't describe to you just how much your love and comments have brightened my days lately, when I've really needed it so thank you ❤ ALRIGHT, enough of me; LET'S GO!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Is it *really* a purr?”

“What else would it be?”

“I dunno, I guess I just never knew he purred.”

“I’ve never heard it.”

“Me neither.”

Hyunjin could hear voices all around him so either he was surrounded or he was actually going crazy. But neither of those things seemed very concerning because he currently had the loveliest rumble shaking through his chest. This even ebb and flow, like the tide of the ocean. It was peaceful. And warm. God, he was so *warm.* It was heavenly, even if his back was aching and he’d slept with his neck at a terrible angle, he was so happy.

He tightened his arms, feeling a solid, soft body between them and wondering if he could somehow pull him closer even though he was already spilling off his lap, head using his tummy as a pillow.

“He sounds like a little motor or something.”

“Should we wake him up or is that like, bad?”

“Bad?”

“Ya know how you’re not supposed to wake up someone who’s sleep walking?”

There was a long pause before Hyunjin heard something like a slap, a yelp and a “What the hell was that for?”

Hyunjin took a deep breath in through his nose, feeling the need to stretch finally win out. He rolled his shoulders just a little, trying very, very hard not to disrupt the purring kitten in his lap as his consciousness bled back in.

He slowly opened his eyes, the lighting still dim and the T.V. still playing nonsense. Sure enough, he *was* surrounded by six pairs of highly interested eyes. But none of them were staring at him. Instead, they were staring at the furball curled up in his lap.

Hyunjin’s eyes followed to find Felix, still fast asleep. His ears twitched at invisible sounds as he continued to purr in long, even peels.

He’d done it. He’d finally made Felix purr.

He felt an overwhelming rush of pride fill his blood, cascading all the way down to his toes. He flexed his fingers where they lay on Felix’s shoulder, giving him little tiny scratches and watching in wonder as Felix sighed in his sleep, twisting himself up tighter.

“Morning,” he said softly, his voice still rough with sleep.

“Good morning, Romeo.” Minho said with a smirk.

Hyunjin would have blushed but he was simply too relaxed and blessed to do so. So he nodded with his heavy head and left it at that.

“So what's up with this?” Seungmin asked, a devilish little smile tugging at his lips.

“Lixie asked for cuddles.” Hyunjin said simply. He really sort of wished he could just go back to sleep. Felix’s purrs were so heavenly, he wanted to drown in them a little bit longer.

“Wait, he just straight up asked you for cuddles?”

Hyunjin giggled a little at the use of the word straight but didn't comment on it. “Yeah. He woke up for a second and asked for cuddles.”

Was that weird? Felix seemed like the kind of guy who would fearlessly and frequently ask for cuddles or snuggles or hugs or

something. Was that *not* the case?

Was Hyunjin, dare he hoped, *special?*

“Huh,” Chan said, his brow lowered like he was trying to solve a tough math problem or see into the future.

“Yes. *Huh* indeed.” Jisung said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Minho just snorted and rolled his eyes at him with such affection that even Jisung blushed, looking down at his feet and being oddly quiet. Docile, almost. Hyunjin had to wonder if their little conversation earlier was still floating around his head.

“Well, why don't you wake him up for breakfast. My mom is making pancakes.” Chan said kindly.

Hyunjin nodded, still feeling lazy with sleep. He wished they had more time. And maybe a bed. And a mountain of blankets. And he wished it was raining outside and he wished that Felix could just curl up against him and spend all day getting ear scratches.

But as the group filtered out of the living room, presumably going to the kitchen, Hyunjin looked down at the messy blond hair on his lap and sighed.

“Hey Lixie?” He whispered, scratching at the base of his ears.

The blond snuffled against him and tried to bury his face further into Hyunjin's stomach.

The brunette giggled softly and continued his scratches. “Lix-ie,” he said in a sing song voice. “It's time to get up, sweetie.”

He nearly bit his fucking tongue off but his brain was too slow to catch that pet name before it fell. Thankfully, Felix seemed *determined* to stay asleep.

He huffed, almost like he was annoyed. His hands started kneading at Hyunjin's stomach, making little biscuits in his sleep.

Hyunjin couldn't help but coo in sheer adoration. The blond was starting to slide down, his hands kneading with insistence, trying to soften the taut abdomen underneath him.

Hyunjin giggled, squirming a little. “Come on Lix, that tickles.” He

poked the blond in the side, earning him a little huff as Felix readjusted and continued making biscuits.

Lower.

Like, in his *lap* lower.

Hyunjin's brain screeched to a halt, his blood freezing in his veins as he struggled to comprehend just *how close* Felix's hands were to his -

“H-hey, Lix? It's time to get up, okay?”

Bad phrasing. *Something* was getting up and it was *not* Felix.

Hyunjin should have paid attention that one time his grandma took him to Mass. He needed Hail Marys or a miracle or something.

“L-Lixie. Come on-”

Nope, also bad phrasing.

The blond huffed, seemingly *very* upset that his biscuits were not working. In fact, the area was getting *harder*.

Scratch that, he needed a *confessional.*

The blond doubled down, his little fingers digging in harder, mere *centimeters* from Hyunjin's growing problem.

“F-Felix. I-I, y-you *have* to wake up. *Please.”*

He was desperate for so many things right now. For Felix to stop. For Felix to keep going. For Felix to move his fingers just a *little* further south. For Felix to wake up and show him those big brown eyes that made his heart melt.

He was desperate to be *anywhere* but here and also *loath* to leave their little bubble that had just turned so dangerously dirty.

Hyunjin groaned, losing the battle to stay quiet as Felix's pinky just *barely* brushed his hardness.

Hyunjin was up and on his feet in a flash; he had to put some distance between himself and these tempting sin biscuits. He could *never* do something like this without Felix's full knowledge.

Unfortunately, his legs were numb after a night under Felix and he

found himself immediately falling to the floor unceremoniously. He landed *hard,* on his back.

“Jin Jin?” Felix said through a thick yawn.

Hyunjin quickly rolled over into his stomach, crushing his erection and hiding the bright red shame painted all over his face.

“Jin Jin, why are you down there?” Felix said. He sounded like he was pouting.

“Just uh, just stretching.” Hyunjin said, trying his hardest to not sound hard.

Thankfully, he was pretty sure he'd either broken his dick or at least snuffed it into submission by pinning it under him.

Felix giggled, the joyous noise interrupted by another yawn. “Well, that's no fun,” he said.

And Hyunjin just *had* to turn his head and find Felix stretching out long on the couch, his tail all staticy from the dry morning air.

All Hyunjin could think was *big stretch.*

“I was hoping to wake up to more cuddles.” Felix said, arms crossed over his bare arms like he was suddenly cold now.

Did Hyunjin tell him that they *had* been cuddling? All night? And all morning? Until his dick got hard because Felix decided to open a naughty bakery in his lap?

He wouldn't even know where to begin.

“Maybe next time?” It came out as a question because honestly, he wasn't sure he deserved a next time.

“Yes please,” Felix said softly like the most polite kitten in the world.

Feeling it was finally safe to roll over, Hyunjin shifted to his side, rewarded with the sight of a sleep rumpled Felix as he sleepily rubbed at his eyes. His face was bare, freckles a riotous mess all over his cheeks and a little bit of a rogue curl had started to sneak into his hair.

He was stunning.

“What?” Felix asked, touching his face carefully. “Did I drool? Please tell me I didn't drool.” He pawed at his face nervously, looking for any trace of wetness.

Hyunjin couldn't help but smile at his endearing little worry.

“No, no, no drool.” Hyunjin assured him. “Just…I love your freckles.” He said honestly. “I wish I got to see them more.”

The blond stared at him with finally awake eyes. A delicate pink blush painted his cheeks and he reached up again, this time to trace the path his freckles took over the bridge of his nose and god *damn* Hyunjin was jealous.

“Yeah?” Felix asked shyly, eyes flitting up from under his lashes.

“Yeah.”

“Well…I guess we'll just need to do more sleepovers then.” Felix had a sly little grin, mighty pleased by how smooth he'd just been.

Hyunjin couldn't help but to smirk back. “Yeah. I uh…I guess you're right.”

He'd need to train his body against unwelcome, inappropriate actions but he would do *anything* to see those freckles up close more often.

Felix finally stood, stretching his arms up over his head and revealing a little strip of midriff that had Hyunjin blushing.

“Where is everyone?”

“Kitchen. I guess Chan’s mom is making pancakes?”

Felix groaned. “Oh God, Mrs. Ji-Sue makes the best pancakes but you can *never* tell my mom I said that, okay?”

Hyunjin laughed, nodding easily.

“She makes normal and blueberry but for *me,* she makes chocolate chip!” Felix said proudly. He stood, grabbing his flimsy robe and wrapping it around him like it would do *anything* against the cold.

The robe was pink and gauzy, trimmed in cheap fake feathers. All he was missing was a cigarette on one of those long holders and he'd look like a rich widower suspected of killing her husband for the money.

“Lixie, hold on,” Hyunjin laughed, standing up himself and unzipping his hoodie. “Here, wear this.”

He felt like the full body blush he'd bathed in from embarrassment earlier was still simmering in his skin, keeping him plenty warm.

“Jinnie, you don't have to do that.”

“Are you cold?” Hyunjin asked, knowing the answer.

Felix shuffled in his spot a little. “I mean…yeah. A little.”

“Then wear it.” He urged. “I don't need it right now, I promise.”

Felix shyly took it in hand, holding it with a growing smile before putting it on. The shoulders were far too big and the sleeves ate his hands completely but his smile already looked warmer.

“Thanks Jin Jin,” he chirped, reaching out to grab his hand. “Now come on! I'll share my special pancakes with you!”

Hyunjin wondered if holding Felix’s hand in his own would ever feel normal. He sort of hoped so but he also sort of hoped it wouldn’t.

They crashed down the hallway, following the noise of a kitchen full of boys, Felix giggling the whole way. It was so infectious that by the time they entered the room, he found himself smiling like a loser, giggling for no other reason besides being happy that Felix was happy.

“Took you long enough!” Seungmin crowed when they arrived. “We’re almost out of pancakes!”

Felix’s giggling stopped cold, a look of sheer terror flowing over his face in a way that nearly had Hyunjin ready to throw hands. Metaphorically of course, but still.

“Oh hush, Seungminnie,” Chan’s mom said with a gentle roll of the eyes. “Don’t worry Lixie, I’ve got a special plate set aside just for you.” Sure enough, she twisted around to grab a plate, presenting a stack of chocolate chip pancakes that were still steaming.

How did moms do that? Their food was always warm, even if they’d been cooking for hours. They knew how to perfectly orchestrate the order of *everything,* almost verging on being *psychic.*

“What about you, Hyunjin? I have blueberry and plain. Do you have a preference? If you want, I can make you some of Lix’s special

pancakes too?"

"Oh, it's okay Mrs. Ji-Sue! Jin Jin is gonna share with me!"

A crippling silence took over the room abruptly, only ruined by Jisung spitting out his orange juice all over the table and Jeongin looking utterly disgusted.

"I-I'm sorry but *what the fuck?"*

"Channie! Language!"

"Sorry mom but, but…*what*? Lix *sharing food?"* Chan's normally honeyed skin was concerningly pale as his eyes pingponged back and forth between Felix and Hyunjin.

"It's the end times," Jisung said quietly, sounding like he was in shock.

But Felix merely shrugged, busy drowning his pancakes in maple syrup and whipped cream. "You're being dramatic,"

"Dramatic?" Jeongin said, still wiping orange juice off the table with a pile of soaked napkins. "Felix, you threatened to *haunt* Changbin after he stole a french fry. He started sleeping with a nightlight after that!"

Changbin laughed awkwardly, eyes looking around frantically. "N-no I didn't…" The following weak laugh made it very clear that he indeed had.

"Well sure but they were *waffle* fries. They weren't your average crinkle cut." The blond looked at his sugar laden masterpiece, completely distracted by his creation as he made his way to the table, happy as a clam.

"Well it's very kind of you to share, Lixie but I'm sure Hyunjin will want some of his own too. He didn't grow that tall by eating someone's left overs." She smiled happily at the loitering Hyunjin, unsure if he should follow Felix to the table.

"Oh, that's a good point! Get some pancakes then, Jin Jin. I'll save you a bite."

Chan's mother smiled at the blond who was already shoveling pancakes into his face at an alarming rate before turning back to the brunette with the warmest smile.

“What will it be then, Hyunjin? Blueberry or plain?”

“Um, blueberry?” He said shyly.

She nodded towards the stack of plates and Hyunjin grabbed one, admiring the delicate blue pattern on the thin white ceramic.

“Are those lilies?” He asked before he could stop himself.

Her smile only grew as she flipped two large blueberry pancakes onto a pretty patterned plate. “Yes. They were a present from my mother for my wedding.” She said. “Do you like flowers?”

“Love them.” He said quietly, feeling bashful but welcomed by her sweet smile.

“Me too.” She said, even reaching out and patting him on the shoulder. If Hyunjin had to guess, he’d think that perhaps he’d passed the parent test.

“Now go eat while they’re still warm. Toppings are on the island and butter is on the table.”

Hyunjin nodded and took his plate to the table, squeezing in next to Felix since the blond was eagerly patting the empty chair next to him.

There were actually only 6 chairs at the table but Binnie had shoved his way onto Jeongin’s chair, much to the smaller man’s displeasure and naturally, Minho and Jisung were glued to each other’s sides. But where Hyunjin would expect to find Jisung hanging all over Minho, perhaps even offering to wipe the maple syrup from the corner of his lips, he found Jisung oddly quiet. He was staring down at his empty plate, dragging the tines of his fork through the leftover syrup.

But before Hyunjin could think too deeply about it, he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to find a soaked forkful of pancake precariously floating in front of his lips. Felix was *beaming* behind it, a soft blush in place as he cupped his other hand underneath to catch the stray drips.

“Here Jin Jin, try it!”

Hyunjin stared at the mess of food, frozen for a moment until Felix urged the fork forward, eyes begging him to try.

So he did. He leaned forward, keeping his eyes down and *not* on the

big brown eyes watching him as he took the offered bite. It was pure sugar; no wonder Felix liked it.

“It’s like dessert for breakfast.” Hyunjin said, licking the extra syrup off his lips and feeling his teeth fucking tingle from all the sugar.

“I *know,* isn’t it great?” Felix said happily, his smile so wide and his cheeks streaked with syrup and whipped cream. His ears were perked up and happy, twitching like they were already experiencing a sugar rush.

Hyunjin chuckled, ducking his head and swallowing. “Super great.” He said. Because it *was* delicious, even if he didn’t think he could do more than one bite. But it was *even better* when the blond fed it to him. Hell, he’d eat the entire plate if he was fed forkful after forkful by Felix.

Felix chittered happily, tucking back into his food as Hyunjin painted his own with butter and responsibly cut neat little squares, eating it slowly and carefully.

He couldn’t help the way his eyes looked up and across the table, watching Jisung watch Minho. He kept flicking little glances over at him. Nervous little looks that had Hyunjin wondering if he was okay. He hoped he hadn’t pushed too hard last night or spoken out of turn. Maybe he should apologize or something.

“So Lixie, since when do you purr?” Changbin asked, his plate cleared and pushed to the center. His short hair was sticking up all over the place, eyes a little puffy from sleep and never before seen glasses rested on his nose. He was the epitome of a sleep rumpled hunk and Hyunjin could admit that.

The blond paused, seemingly caught off guard by the question. Hyunjin saw that little flash of fear in his eyes. That same flash that probably lived in his own eyes most days: what if they don’t like me? What if they think I’m weird?

Without thinking, he reached out a hand under the table and squeezed Felix’s knee. His skin was cold so he kept his fingers pressed there, trying to share some of his warmth.

Felix took a little breath before shrugging, shoulders caving in a little. “Oh, so…was I purring last night?”

He was watching his last little bite of soggy pancake, pushing it

around like he'd suddenly lost his appetite.

"Yeah." Changbin said effortlessly. He drained his coffee and stood, wordlessly grabbing Chan's mug and walking to the coffee pot. "It's *way* cuter than Jisung's snoring."

"I do *not* snore!" Jisung whined as Minho said, "Shut up, his snoring is super cute."

Jisung's boba eyes went even wider, *finally* looking up from his empty plate and plastering all over Minho, like he wanted to see to the bottom of his pores. His eyes dug in *desperately,* but Minho was busy examining his nails.

Felix perked up, a tentative hope on his face. "Y-yeah?"

"Totally," Chan said with a smile.

"You don't think it's like, weird or something?" Felix asked, eyes moving around the table and looking for some sign of judgement. But there was none.

"Why would it be weird?" Changbin said, walking back with three mugs of coffee. He set one in front of Hyunjin with a wink and continued on his way, giving Chan back his mug and finally sitting down with his own. "You're a *kitten* hybrid. Wouldn't it be weirder if you *didn't*?"

And something about Binnie's simple logic seemed to break through to Felix. The blond cracked a relieved looking smile as one of his little hands reached under the table to squeeze Hyunjin's fingers on his knee. "Yeah, I guess so." He said with a smile.

That shy smile only lasted a second though before he was knocking his shoulder into Hyunjin and grinning full force. "Jin Jin is just so comfy, I couldn't help it! He gives the best cuddles."

"Is that right?" Jeongin said, leaning over with a shit eating grin. "Well then my turn next," he waggled an eyebrow with a smirk.

Thankfully, before Hyunjin could proudly tell Jeongin that he was flattered but completely and totally married in his head, Felix narrowed his eyes, ears flattening ever so slightly. An awfully low burble rumbled out of him, almost like a growl.

It was only a second before it stopped and his eyes went wide,

evidently very confused by his own reaction.

“I uh…sorry about that, Jeonginnie.” Felix said, frowning down at his plate.

But the other boy only smiled wider. “No worries, Lixie. I didn't realize the cuddles were *exclusive.”*

The blond blushed, eyes darting over to Hyunjin before his little hand tried to slide off his knee under the table.

But that simply wouldn't do.

Hyunjin squeezed his fingers, silently begging him to stay and said, “Yeah. They are pretty exclusive.”

He swore he could *feel* Felix's lovely little blush on his finger tips. But he didn't look. Instead, he watched Jeongin laugh happily and Chan giggling, “Good man, Hyunnie, good man.”

Hyunjin let a little smile bloom because honestly, at this moment? He felt a little like a hero. Like, a hero with super bad social anxiety and who could barely look potential friends in the eye but still.

If nothing else, he could stand up for Lix in little ways.

And the way the blond held his fingers back made him think that maybe that was enough.

“Yah, Jiji, careful!”

Minho's voice cut through the quieting laughter, pulling Hyunjin’s eyes. He couldn’t help it. Perhaps it was because like recognized like so when Minho said Jisung’s little nickname with such fond exasperation, he couldn't help but zero in on it.

That and after the conversation he’d had with Jisung last night, he had to admit that he felt a little guilty. Jisung had been out of it all morning; oddly distant and quiet. Perhaps he was just like that in the morning but something in Hyunjin doubted it. He thought of Jisung like a generator; he didn’t need things like caffeine or sugar to power him. He made his own energy just by existing.

He watched as Minho grabbed a napkin, wrapping it around his index finger and effortlessly reached over to wipe some syrup from the corner of his lips.

The cliche of it all nearly made Hyunjin swoon but he held it together.

Jisung's eyes blew wide, lips a little agape like he simply couldn't believe it. He was looking at Minho like he'd never seen him before. He was looking at Minho like he was going to cry.

Or maybe he'd heard Hyunjin last night and he was *finally* looking at the *way* Minho looked at him. That soft smile and the subtle shake of his head. The steady, heavy eyes that never seemed to want to leave Jisung's face.

The moment couldn't have been that long but Hyunjin swore he could *see* all of the possibilities and doubts and fears and worries and hopes rushing behind Jisung's eyes as he slid his hand onto Minho's face, leaned forward, and kissed him.

With sticky lips, in front of everyone.

The room went silent. Evidently, Hyunjin hadn't been the only one watching.

Minho's eyes were wide open, his body frozen like the slightest movement would scare him off.

Jisung pulled back, his lips trembling, his hands shaking. His eyes slowly opened and Hyunjin could *see* the reality flood them.

He sprang back, hands up. "I uh, I-I'm sorry. I'm so, I-I have to go."

Jisung stood up so fast his chair fell back, hitting the floor with a crash as he ran from the kitchen.

"Jisung! Wait!"

Minho was up and out of the room, hot on his heels. The sound of pounding footfalls and frantic calls for him to just *stop* and *listen* and *please just hold on,* travelled further away until the front door opening and closing blotted it out entirely.

The whole room was silent in their wake.

Hyunjin felt frozen. He swore, he'd just seen the turning point of one of the world's greatest romances but it didn't feel that way. He felt vaguely sick with worry. He *needed* Minho to catch him. To talk some sense into him. To fucking grab him and *kiss him back.*

“Holy shit,” Seungmin finally said, pounding the last of his water like it was liquor. He leaned back heavily in his chair with a thousand yard stare. “It finally fucking happened.”

“In my fucking kitchen. In front of my *fucking mom.*” Chan breathed.

“Channie, *language.”* Mrs. Bang’s voice sounded almost breathless, like she too was in shock.

Felix was looking around the table, holding Hyunjin’s fingers in an anxious deathgrip. His eyes jumped from face to face, looking for reassurance when he asked, “They’re going to be okay, right? Like… Jisungie will stop and listen to Minnie? And they’ll be happy and in love finally, right?”

There were nervous glances all around the table, no one sure if saying yes would be a lie or not.

“I don’t know Lix,” Chan said gently. “Jisung can run pretty fast when he wants to.”

Felix looked distressed by this. “Well yeah b-but like, he also falls a lot so maybe he’ll fall? And Minnie will catch him and they’ll talk? Right?”

He sounded desperate for a positive answer so Hyunjin squeezed his fingers under the table and did his best to give him a reassuring smile. “Yeah. That could happen.” He said. Because it *could.* And Hyunjin wanted to believe in silly things like crushes turning to love and love lasting so he nodded again, trying to sound sure. “Let’s hope they figure it out finally.”

Felix looked at Hyunjin with a naked kind of hope and he nodded in return.

The rest of breakfast was a little awkward, Changbin making some joke about how normally their sleepovers had less drama and how he hoped it wouldn’t scare Hyunjin off. But the taller man had assured him that it hadn’t. Even with the added drama, he’d be *honored* to be invited back.

They all helped to clean up the kitchen, Chan’s mom beaming with pride and thanking them all profusely. She even ruffled Hyunjin’s hair and called him a gentleman which had him brimming with pride and finally certain that he hadn’t ruined the first impression.

Slowly the life came back to the group, levity infusing itself back in. After all, as Chan put it, it wasn't truly any of their business. It was up to Jisung and Minho to talk it out now so all they could do was hope for the best.

However, that didn't stop the *gnawing* in Hyunjin's brain, wanting so badly to gossip with Lix on the play by play of that fucking *kiss.*

So when they all started to disperse, Hyunjin bit the bullet and asked Felix if he'd like a ride home.

The blond had *beamed,* running over to his duffle bag and pulling out his helmet like he'd been hoping the brunette would ask. He'd already added a sparkly glitter kitten sticker and dozens of little stars with what looked to be a paint pen.

"Since when do you have a *helmet*?" Chan asked, looking a bit incredulous as he looked between Hyunjin and Felix.

"Since recently," Felix said, his tail swooshing out proud. "What? Are you jealous?"

Chan shuddered. "No. But I'm sure Jisung will be so you might want to hide that helmet if you don't want him trying to steal it."

"He can't. It's *mine.*" Felix said with confidence, hugging the helmet to his chest with surety and twisting it away from everyone like they were going to try to physically take it from him.

"Is that right?" Changbin asked, joining Chan as he slung his bag over his shoulder.

"Uh-huh! See? I already started putting stickers on it, so it's *mine.*"

He said it like he'd just stated some undeniable scientific evidence instead of just motioning toward the kitten sticker he'd placed on the side.

"Right, Jin Jin?" Felix asked, his eyes wide as he looked up at him.

Hyunjin couldn't hold in his smile as he reached up to give him some much deserved ear scratches. "That right, Lixie. Those *are* the rules."

Changbin laughed happily while Chan rolled his eyes affectionately. Somewhere in the background, Seungmin was pretending to throw up.

Felix stuck his tongue out at Seungmin and finally finished packing up

his things. He haphazardly stuffed his clothes back into his bulging bag, alongside two plushies, an entire case full of makeup he hadn't touched and a gel pen set that Hyunjin wouldn't be surprised if he carried with him everywhere, *just in case.*

Hyunjin waited patiently while Felix ran around the room, remembering to grab his phone charger from the wall and then remembering he needed to brush his teeth and then remembering he didn't have his contacts and needing to find Chan's dad to see if he had any glasses cleaner he could use.

Nearly twenty minutes later, a mess of blond curls and freckles declared himself *ready* and Hyunjin had to pinch himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

They wished everyone a happy Sunday, Hyunjin making a special point to find Chan's parents and thank them for their hospitality before leaving.

In silent agreement, they exited the house with polite waves, calmly walked down the front steps, down the driveway and over to Hyunjin's bike. And when they were pretty sure they were out of sight and earshot, they both turned to one another, silently screaming into their hands.

"Oh my *god,* Jisung kissed Mihho! He *kissed* him, Jin Jin! *On the lips!"*

Hyunjin nodded furiously in return. "Yeah but did you see the *before*?"

"The before?"

"Oh my *god, the before,"* Hyunjin whined, his head tipping back so he could speak to the sky. "Minho was wiping syrup off of Jisung's lips-"

"Stoooop-"

"-I *know!*" Hyunjin cried, hands reaching up to tug at his hair. God, he *loved* love. He was feeling secondhand butterflies just remembering it. It had been like watching the main characters you'd been rooting for the *entire* movie, *finally* realize they were madly in love. Well, sort of. Minus the running away part.

Felix sighed, sounding dreamy in a way that pulled Hyunjin's eyes back down. "I really hope they're okay."

The blond was looking down the road, like he was hoping to see them

at the end professing their feelings.

“They will be.” Hyunjin soothed, needing to hear it himself as well.

Felix nodded resolutely, setting his lips in a determined line before giving Hyunjin the most adorable little smirk. “Alright, let's ride.”

Hyunjin snorted, unable to help himself as he helped fit the helmet onto the blond’s head. It really wasn't a two person job but he liked doing it for him. It felt almost domestic in a way. He also loved the way the shorter man looked up at him when he was done, his little face grinning up at him before the visor flipped down.

Hyunjin donned his own helmet and straddled the bike, pulling it off the kickstand. Felix hopped on fearlessly this time, any timidness from the last time gone. You’d think they’d been riding together for *years.* The blond moved in close this time, crushing Hyunjin’s small bag between them as he held on tight. He popped his chin onto Hyunjin’s shoulder and the taller man swore, in that second before he started the bike, that rumble was another purr.

But with the bike going, it was hard to tell. They melted together and it washed over Hyunjin like a comfort blanket. His bike was his escape. It was his safe space. And in his safe space, he could do anything. Like pat Felix’s intertwined fingers, smoothing a thumb over them before grabbing back onto the handlebar and steering them into the street.

The ride was too short, in Hyunjin’s opinion. He’d like an excuse to keep Felix pressed against him for a few more minutes. But a small town meant nothing was ever really too far away. He pulled up outside Felix’s house, turning the bike off and leaning it onto the kickstand.

Felix sighed happily against his shoulder before slowly detangling his fingers and letting go. He slid off the bike, still a little wobbly but much smoother than last time and Hyunjin stayed seated. He wasn’t really sure what to do.

Should he say he’d see him on Monday and ride away? Should he ask what he was doing today? Ask if he wanted company? Or was that too much after an entire sleepover?

The blond pried the helmet off his head, hair tumbling out dramatically in frizzy curls. He looked so delightfully natural it had Hyunjin’s heart clenching in his chest.

And suddenly, he remembered that silly little present he'd made for him. The one nestled safely in his backpack that he'd been too nervous to give him in front of everyone else last night. Perhaps now was a better time.

"Well, thanks for the ride," Felix said, helmet under his arm and pinned to his hip like a pro. "I guess I'll see you o-"

"I have something for you." Hyunjin said in a rush, forcing himself to just fucking *say it.* With the words out, he couldn't back out.

The blond froze before his ears perked up, seemingly interested. "For me?"

Hyunjin nodded, finally dismounting his bike and standing awkwardly on the sidewalk next to him. He pulled his bag around to his side, unzipping it to start digging.

"Like a present?"

Hyunjin nodded again. "Yeah. It's uh…for your birthday, actually?"

Felix's wondrous brown eyes got wider. "You remembered my birthday?"

Hyunjin frowned. "Of course I did." Had Felix really thought he would forget?

The softest little smile spread onto Felix's lips. Like strawberry jam on toast. Lovely and pink. Soft and sweet. "Of course you did," Felix said quietly to his feet.

Hyunjin pulled the item out, firmly wrapped in his fist and held it nervously in front of his chest. "It's uh, it's not much. And I didn't have time to wrap it because I just finished making it yesterday."

"You *made* it?" The blond looked *very* excited by that idea. He bounced forward on his toes, his tail swishing out like it was curious and wanted to see too.

The brunette nodded and swallowed nervously. "Yeah, I just…happy birthday, Lixie."

He fought the urge to close his eyes as he reached out, fingers uncurled and palm up to reveal a bright orange leaf. It was encased in clear resin, a hole drilled painstakingly in the top and made into a

keychain.

It was simple and it truly wasn't much but the idea had felt *right.*

How did he explain this present? Perhaps to Felix, the other day had been fun, but commonplace. Perhaps someone made of magic didn't see it as all that special anymore. But Hyunjin had never experienced such sunshine before. Such *freedom.*

Something deep inside him had *tugged* when Felix started catching leaves. It made him think of himself when he was younger. It made him think of him *now,* picking flowers to press in between the feather light pages of the old dictionary in his dad's study.

He felt a familiarity with Felix at that moment. Like maybe, just maybe, they'd been cut from the same cloth. And Hyunjin had never met someone like that before.

Those leaves, collected and pressed in a text book on the dusty side of an autumn-stricken road, felt like *treasures* to him. And he wanted Felix to carry one with him always.

Maybe that was too much to ask. Maybe that was delusional of him. Or maybe Felix would just see it as a cute trinket and not the strange declaration that Hyunjin meant it to be. He wouldn't blame him.

But when he finally forced himself to look up and observe Felix's reaction, he was nearly shocked to see the blond frozen. Tears in his eyes.

"Lix?" He said quietly, worried he'd somehow fucked this up. He'd never given a friend a present before. What if there were rules and he'd broken one of them? Or *all* of them?

"Jin Jin," Felix said, a soupy little laugh breaking out of him. He reached out with shaking hands to carefully take the keychain. He raised it up to catch the light, letting it twist in the cool breeze and staring at it with awe. Like it was a shooting star or something fleeting.

His eyes grew thick with tears again before his eyes dropped back down to Hyunjin. "*Jin Jin,*" He said again, stepping forward and throwing his arms around Hyunjin's neck.

Hyunjin stumbled back in surprise, arms wrapping around Felix's waist on instinct, his mind breathing out a sigh of relief.

He could feel the blond shuddering against him, holding on tighter and tighter.

“Did I do okay, Lix?” Hyunjin couldn’t help but ask.

The blond laughed, backing up and away far too soon to dab at his eyes. “You did *great.”*

Felix gazed back down at the keychain in his hand and shook his head slowly, like he simply couldn’t believe it. “You really made this?”

Hyunjin nodded and shoved his needy hands deep into his pockets so he wouldn’t reach out and haul the blond back against him. “Yeah, I uh, I realized I forgot to give you all your leaves back after I dropped you off. And then I was thinking about your birthday and this idea just sort of hit.” He shrugged like it hadn’t consumed a large portion of his evening and kept him up late.

“I know you like keychains. And you seemed to really like those leaves. And, I mean…” he trailed off, taking a deep breath. Felix was always so open and honest with him. He wanted to reciprocate. “That afternoon with you…it was really fun. It uh…it felt *special.”* He looked up through his lashes nervously, finding Felix gazing at him with such kind understanding. No judgement in sight.

“I wanted to capture a little moment of it and give it to you to keep.” He admitted quietly.

He watched as the blond clutched it to his chest like a prized possession.

“That afternoon felt special to me too.” Felix said quietly back. His cheeks had a little pink to them but so did the tip of his nose so maybe it was just the cold. “But maybe that’s just because *you’re* special.” He said, throwing a wink in but sounding far too genuine.

Hyunjin, in an attempt to not spontaneously combust, snorted and rolled his eyes. “Sure, okay. I’m pretty sure that’s you, Lixie.”

The blond giggled, stepping forward and using his free hand to snag one of Hyunjin’s. “Fine, then we’re *both* special. Must be why we get along so well.”

“I thought it was because we both ship Minho and Jisung.”

Felix’s smile bloomed wide and happy as his head tipped back, a long

laugh peeling out of him. It brought a matching smile to Hyunjin's face.

When Felix finished, his eyes fell back on Hyunjin and that smile settled into something that felt stable and sure. "Jin Jin?"

"Yeah?" Hyunjin asked, anchored by the warm fingers in his own.

Felix's voice was even, his smile unwavering as he asked, "Will you please come inside and meet my parents?"

Hyunjin froze. Cold fear started to creep over his heart, pulling tighter and tighter but he forced himself to breath through it because Felix was looking at him with such hope. Such gentle, hope. Like he really, truly wanted Hyunjin to say yes.

"I…a-are you sure?"

His chocolate eyes became melted. "Of course I am."

Hyunjin nodded. He *heard* his words but they didn't make very much sense to him. Why would Felix want him to meet his parents?

Hyunjin could have dwelled on that all day and been no closer to an answer. So instead, he focused on the way Felix's little fingers tightened in his, the way his tail was still, like it too was waiting for an answer.

He couldn't let him down.

Hyunjin nodded, finally pulling his own helmet off. He set it down on the seat of his bike, running nervous palms over his short hair before deciding he should take the helmet with him. What if they thought he'd driven their son home and *not* worn one? They would think he was irresponsible or stupid.

He nearly fumbled his helmet when picking it up but then decided he should straighten his jacket so he set it down again, making sure the seams fell *directly* on his shoulders because he wasn't dressed to impress necessarily but he could *at least* not look sloppy.

He picked his helmet up again, hearing a little giggle behind him. He turned to find Felix watching him, biting his lower lip in delight.

"You're cute," He said, completely unprovoked.

Hyunjin blinked at him, trying to figure out a better response than just

passing out. But he wasn't given the time to agonize over it as Felix grabbed his hand and started hauling him towards the door.

Objectively, this was a good call. Hyunjiin could - and *would* - spend all day hyperfixating on if he could remove his eyebrow piercing right there, on the sidewalk prior to meeting Felix's parents.

However, *subjectively,* the skin on skin contact was making Hyunjin's heart race even more than it already had been.

He let Felix drag him to the front door, barrelling through it and shouting out, "I'm home!"

"Welcome back, Lix!"

Hyunjin heard the sweetest female voice floating from some far corner of the house and *instantly* knew it had to be his mom. While not nearly as deep as his, her voice was dark and smoky. It had this hypnotic sort of evenness to it that she'd passed directly on to her son.

Then he heard footsteps, walking toward them. "Hey Lix, did you eat breakfast or…"

A man rounded the corner, his eyes going wide and curious as he took in the tall stranger holding his son's hand in the foyer.

"Hello," He said, sounding a bit dazed. He had a pair of glasses in one hand, cleaning cloth in the other rubbing at the lenses between thumb and forefinger.

Hyunjin watched as the man shook his head ever so slightly and arranged his face into a smile. One that *immediately* confirmed what Hyunjin suspected: this was Felix's dad.

"Hello!" He said again, much warmer. "My apologies, I was just surprised to see someone else here! I'm Gang-Min, Yongbok's father." He hastily pushed his glasses back onto his nose, shoving the cloth into his pocket and rushing forward with that wide smile and an extended hand.

Hyunjin tried his best to smile back but he was sure he looked as terrified as he felt. "H-Hwang Hyunjin, sir. P-pleased to meet you."

Goddammit, they were going to think he had a stutter or something at his rate.

But Felix's dad didn't seem to notice. Or if he did, much like his son, he simply didn't care. He just took Hyunjin's hand, giving him a jovial, exuberant handshake.

"Ara, come on out! Felix brought a friend!"

There was a sound of shuffling coming from the back of the house. "Oh, is it Channie? I haven't seen that boy in-oh!"

She rounded the same corner, eyes going wide when they landed on Hyunjin. They looked him up and down, lighting fast and he swore to god, he saw the tiniest smirk pull at her lips before a full smile bloomed. "Oh! This must be Hyunjin!"

The brunette's ears perked up, his brow lowering a little as he accepted another handshake, this time from Felix's mom.

"How…?" He asked quietly, not sure if it was rude to ask.

But Felix's mom merely smiled mischievously, eyes darting over to her son. "Oh, this one has talked about you *quite* a bit-"

"Mom!" Felix cried, darting in between them and breaking their handshake. His frantic eyes swung back to Hyunjin, pleading. "Don't listen to her! She's old. Senile." He turned back to his mom, cringing a little. "No offense."

"Oh, none taken." She deadpanned, rolling her eyes like a teenage girl. But her smile did soften, taking on a maternal tone as she looked back to Hyunjin. "It's nice to finally meet you, Hyunjin."

"Likewise." He stated, delighted when the word came out stutter free the first try.

Felix's mom - Ara - seemed just as delighted. "Oh, a gentleman." She cooed, giving Felix a little wink before taking a few steps to her left. "Can I interest you in something to drink? Do you drink coffee? I *just* brewed a new pot."

Felix made gagging noises in the background as Hyunjin smiled shyly and nodded. "I would love some coffee." He'd only managed one cup before all the Minsung drama and he usually needed at *least* two to function.

Ara smiled and waved for them to follow. Hyunjin paused, toeing his shoes off and setting his helmet carefully on the floor next to it. Felix

dumped his bag down on the floor with reckless abandon and threw his jacket on a nearby coat rack before grabbing Hyunjin's hand again and pulling him to the kitchen.

Hyunjin couldn't help but notice how *happy* Felix's ears and tail seemed to be here. He had to assume it had to do with him being at home. He was safe and comfortable here. His tail knew it was safe and his ears were excited to hear the familiar sounds of his family shuffling around.

Hyunjin let himself be pulled into a sunny, bright kitchen with an eat-in table crammed on one side. The smell of dark roast coffee was bitter and beautiful in the air, making him instantly feel warm.

"Mama, look!" Felix crowed, running up to his mom and dragging Hyunjin along with. "Look what Jin Jin made for me!"

He opened his hand to reveal the little keychain resting in his palm. His eyes *sparkled* when he looked at it and Hyunjin found it hard to look away.

"Oh wow, you made this?" Ara asked, leaning down to get a closer look.

Hyunjin shrugged. "Yeah. It's just a little resin mold, not very hard."

"Still, it's a great idea." She praised before asking. "So why a leaf? What's the significance there?"

Hyunjin paused, not sure how to answer. Something about that afternoon felt so personal. Intimate almost. And it's not that he didn't want others to know. It was just that he liked how it was something only he and Felix shared.

The blond answered for him though. "Just an inside joke." He said effortlessly, his eyes flicking up shyly to Hyunjin.

Could it be that Felix felt something like what Hyunjin did?

The taller boy squeezed the delicate fingers in his own, wanting him to know he had liked his answer.

He swore, Felix preened ever so slightly with the praise. Ara handed him a mug of coffee. "Creamer? Sugar?"

He shook his head, blowing the steam away gently. "Just black."

The blond groaned beside him, already pulling an industrial sized *jug* of chocolate syrup out of the fridge alongside a gallon of milk.

Ara rolled her eyes at Hyunjin like they were co-conspirators before leading him to the table. “Same. Felix gets his sweet tooth from his father.” She nodded her head toward the mentioned man who was adding more creamer into his coffee than coffee itself.

“What’s so wrong with that?” Felix said sassily from across the kitchen, stirring his *dark* chocolate milk, before taking a sip, pausing and adding more chocolate syrup. “Sugar is *delicious!*”

“Atta boy,” Gang-min said stoically, offering his hand for a sharp high-five followed by a bright giggle from his son.

“How you haven’t had a cavity yet is beyond me,” Ara muttered, watching her son sneakily eat a spoonful of straight chocolate syrup before resuming his stirring.

Hyunjin couldn't help but chuckle at it all. He could tell that Felix got along well with his parents, much like Hyunjin did with his own and something about that made him feel warm inside.

It was sweet to watch how his dad moved past him, patting him on the head directly between his ears. It was nice to see Felix in a place where his tail was adventurous and free, whipping excitedly around him.

“So Hyunjin,” Gang-min asked with a kind smile as he settled across the table from him. “The little one said you transferred in at the beginning of the year?”

He nodded, pausing to finish his sip of coffee. “Yes sir.”

“Must have been tough, changing schools senior year.”

Felix’s parents both had matching expressions of gentle empathy but Hyunjin merely shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m pretty used to it, honestly.” He hoped he didn’t sound like he was looking for sympathy. He really wasn’t. It was simply a fact.

“Used to it or not, a whole new school, new teachers, having to leave all your friends behind?”

Hyunjin bit his lip, almost admitting out loud that he hadn’t *had* any

friends. But he didn't want them to start pitying him, that probably wasn't the right thing to say. So, instead, he sidestepped the question just a little by stating something very true.

"I mean, it wasn't so bad. Felix has helped a lot." He felt a little blush carry over his cheeks so he kept his eyes on his coffee. "And Chan and Minho and just…everyone." He hastily added.

Ara hummed and the warmth of the sound had Hyunjin looking up. She settled back into her chair, cradling her mug. "Oh those boys are just the best. *Loud,* but sweet." She laughed lightly.

Hyunjin chuckled under his breath. "Very." He agreed.

"So, what are your plans after graduation?" Gang-min asked, his voice light and casual and not carrying the scary kind of authority that question often carried.

Still, Hyunjin felt a twinge of nervousness race through him. Ideally, this would be the first impression of *many* and he needed it to be *good.* Better than good. *Great.* Otherwise, how would he ever convince them to give him Felix's hand in marriage?

And he felt like his answer, while honest, wasn't the kind that parents usually loved. "Well, um…to be honest? I don't really…know." He bit the inside of his cheek, feeling nervous. "It's…well, like I have ideas of what I want to do. Like…I really like art. But I don't know what I'd do with an art *degree,* ya know? So would it make sense to go to university for it or should I try something more practical? Like, why saddle myself with all this debt from school when artists usually make no money? How do I pay off those loans? But then, if I go for something practical, then like…what? Mechanics? I don't *hate* it but I'm not sure it feels *right* either so I just, I, yeah, I don't know yet." He ended lamely. His cheeks were on fire, his heart hammering jack rabbit fast. He hadn't even graduated yet and already felt like a failure.

"Well, that sounds very thought out." Ara said easily. She was nodding her head like she was processing his words and coming to the same conclusions he had.

"Very sensible." Gang-min agreed. "There's no need to rush. University will be there when you're ready. *If* you're ready." He swatted the air like it was no big deal. "Yongbokkie isn't going to university next year either."

Surprised, Hyunjin looked to the side to find Felix smiling ferally at him. “You’re not?”

Felix shook his head excitedly. “Nope! I’m taking a gap year!”

“R-really?” Hyunjin asked, feeling a weird bubble of happiness bloom in his chest.

The blond giggled, bouncing in his seat before reaching out to clutch one of Hyunjin’s hands in both of his. “Yeah! I need time to figure out what I wanna do, just like you! Which *means,* we can figure it out together!”

Hyunjin felt his breath catch in his throat. A whole year? No classes, no warning bells and terrible, horrible calculus. No studying, no early wake up times or mountains of homework? Just…a year with Felix?

He felt the need to pinch himself but abstained. Just barely, but still.

“I uh…I would really like that.” He croaked, sounding pressed for air.

Felix grinned back, moving in closer like he wanted to cuddle into his side. He looked so eager, that same wiggly kind of energy he got when he wanted to cuddle or play.

And Hyunjin didn’t even think about it as he laughed, raising a hand up to give the eager kitten some much deserved ear scratches.

Felix melted into them but Hyunjin didn’t miss the tiny gasp from across the table.

He tried to pull his hand back but was apparently *not allowed,* as Felix pouted and physically dragged his hand back, pressing it against the base of his ear and nudging into it, making his wants clear.

And Hyunjin was powerless to deny him. So he offered more scratches, a tiny, low purr starting to rumble out of the blond while his parents eyes grew wider and wider at the sight.

It made sense, Hyunjin supposed. Back when they’d first met, Felix had said that the only people who touched his ears or tail were his parents and based on their looks, they knew that.

Hyunjin could see the moment something flipped for Ara. Her wide, stunned eyes melted into something gentle and soft with a *glint* of mischievousness to them.

“Did you know, when Lixie was little, he used to have me put bows on his ears?”

“*Mom!”*

The little purring rumble stopped abruptly.

She thoroughly ignored him, instead grinning evilly at Hyunjin and asking, “Would you like to see?”

“Yes please!”

“*God no!”*

But Ara could not be stopped. Which is how, twenty minutes later, Hyunjin was cooing over a picture of baby Felix, maybe 3 or 4 and nowhere *near* grown into his ears or tail yet, grinning widely on Christmas morning. He had ripped his present open and was happily sitting in the box, loafed up nicely and looking *very* proud.

Gang-Min laughed. “Oh, the *box* phase! It didn't matter *what* we got him! He just wanted the box.”

Felix was banging his forehead against the table, muttering *kill me, please just kill me* over and over again.

But Hyunjin? Oh Hyunjin was having the time of his *life.* He was on his third cup of coffee and had just accepted Ara’s offer to switch to decaf so they could continue the trip down memory lane.

“Hey, it was better than the curtain climbing phase.” Ara said with a very unimpressed look.

The blond’s head shot up. “It was *one time!”*

His mother *and* father leveled him a *look* and Felix immediately shrank a little. “Well…I mean, I only *fell* one time.”

Gang-min sighed and turned to Hyunjin. “Little one thought he had claws when he was small. Used to find him halfway up the curtains or the Christmas tree. He climbed *everything.*”

“I didn’t think I had claws, I *don’t* have claws,” Felix said hurriedly, showing Hyunjin the nails that he himself had painted like he wanted to assure him he indeed did not have claws. “I just…I didn’t, ya know, I leaned into my kitten side a lot harder when I was younger, I guess.”

He shrugged like it was no big deal but Hyunjin could see that little edge of insecurity. He watched the way Felix bit his bottom lip, his brow furrowed ever so slightly like it *bothered* him. The fact that, as a child, he hadn't been *'normal',* whatever that meant.

"That's so fucking cute," Hyunjin sighed before turning bright cherry red. "I-I, I'm so sorry," He stuttered, wide eyed to the Lees. "Please e-excuse my language, I just, it, I mean, i-it's so-"

"Fucking cute? Yeah, I agree." Ara said with a wide smile and a wink.

Hyunjin looked her in the eye, trying his best to decipher if it was some kind of parental trap or not but Ara just kept smiling at him like she truly did agree with the sentiment, regardless of its delivery.

"Do you…really? Like, you don't think it's too weird?"

Hyunjin looked to his side, Felix sitting next to him and looking so small. He was gripping his tail nervously in his lap, his eyes flicking up to look at Hyunjin fleetingly.

The brunette merely smiled down at him, forgetting about his parents and the fact that he'd just dropped a (well received) f-bomb in front of them.

"Lixie, how many times do I have to tell you? There's nothing wrong with your kitten side. It's adorable. Just like your human side."

Because you're *adorable. All of you. All the time.*

He watched a little zing move up Felix's spine, up the back of his neck and through the tips of his ears, standing on end like they'd just heard the sweetest sound.

"Oh, I like this one," Gang-Min said softly before standing to get another cup of mostly creamer.

The words echoed through Hyunjin's skull as Gang-Min brought him back the coffee pot, topping off his cup. He felt them settle deep into his brain as Ara went to go dig up the pre-teen year scrapbooks, much to Felix's horror. And the words started to feel a little like fate when Felix, resigned to the fact that his middle school years were about to be spread all over the kitchen table, latched onto Hyunjin's arm, letting his head thunk to the side and holding on for dear life.

Chapter End Notes

The box phase 😩😩😩 Part of me now wants to write the younger years of kitten hybrid Felix just to see him being adorable climbing curtains lol! Alright, next chapter we have a very fun little development for the story and Hyunjin growing even bolder 😏 I'll see you on Thursday!!!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> AHHHHHHHHH RUN IT IS AMAZING 😩😩😩 I can FEEL the world tour now; it feels real 😩😩😩 Ah-hem...anyways, hello ❤ Welcome back to another installment of "Will Hyunjin survive his first crush??" The answer is obviously no but thanks for tuning in anyways! ALRIGHT, who's ready for a little kitten time?? LET'S GO!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Hyunjin walked into the school on Monday, the first thing he noticed was the absolute *mess* of posters littering the wall. Every bare inch had been invaded and taken over by glittery posterboard with bubbly block letters declaring '*Love is in the Air!'*

Homecoming was approaching and suddenly, it was *inescapable.*

Hyunjin had never paid much attention to school dances before. He'd always simply *known* that he would not go. He was never invited and he'd sure as fuck never gathered up the courage to ask someone. And even though he had a friend group now, he could still pretty solidly confirm that he would still be unable to gather up said courage to ask a certain blond to go with him.

However, seeing the glittery pink signs and the general excitement that suffused the halls, Hyunjin was expecting to find Felix giddy and excited about the prospect of pretty dresses and festivities.

So when he found Felix *scowling* at a poster in the hallway outside the bathroom like it had insulted his mother, Hyunjin was a little surprised.

"You uh, you good?" He asked, stepping up to stand beside him and look at the poster.

The blond gave a long suffering sigh and finally resumed his walk to their lockers.

"It just feels like the worst timing!"

Hyunjin nodded. "Because midterms?" He'd always found it odd why the school would do something like homecoming at the same time as

midterms. Like, did they want participation on *both?* That seemed kind of unfair.

But Felix pouted, his ears getting droopy as he whined, “No, not that! It's Minsung!”

Hyunjin felt a weight drop in his chest. “Have you talked to either of them?”

Felix shook his head, brow creased in worry as they reached their lockers. He stooped down to pull his open but Hyunjin could *hear* the worry in his voice.

“No, but that’s *weird.* Jisungie and I talk almost every day and even if we don’t really talk, he still sends me funny memes or something. But Sunday was silent after you left.”

Aw yes, the Sunday of all Sundays. The day he’d met Felix’s parents and somehow not completely fucked it up. The day he’d seen a whole *five* photo albums chalked full of little Felix with his absurdly large eyes and too big ears and poofy tail. The day that he’d been surprised by a hug from Ara upon leaving and had promised to come by again sometime soon.

Felix’s melancholy sigh reminded him that he was focusing on the wrong thing right now. His mind veered back on track; to Minsung’s romance troubles and not the little dreamy thing he was crafting in his head about him and Felix and forever.

“Maybe he was busy talking to Minho?” Hyunjin said, unable to keep his own skepticism at bay. He’d *seen* the look of pure horror on Jisung’s face when he’d pulled back from the kiss. And while, with anyone else, he would trust Minho would chase them down and force a resolution to the conflict, it was hard to tell with Jisung. Because Jisung wasn’t just anyone else to Minho. Minho was different with him, meaning the rules simply just didn’t apply.

Felix looked up from his squat with a very unimpressed look, his tail even going so far as the snap against Hyunjin leg like a reprimand.

The taller boy nearly bit through his lip trying to contain his smile at the sass but acquiesced all the same. “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Felix stood, crammed between Hyunjin’s body and the locker, seemingly unaffected by the close proximity.

Hyunjin, to his credit, only yelped a little bit but remained upright, which felt like progress.

“I just worry,” Felix said softly, his head downturned as his fingers tightened around his backpack straps. His ears had this gentle slope to them that appeared so sad, so lost that Hyunjin couldn’t help it when he gently pinched the tip of one, pulling it upright.

It pulled those big brown eyes up to his as he tried a smile. “Don’t worry Lixie. I’m sure they’ll figure it out. After all, no matter what, they’re best friends, right? That has to count for something.”

Felix regarded him for a few minutes before nodding in agreement, the sorrow on his face easing up just a little.

“I just hate it when people fight. Especially soulmates.”

Hyunjin felt a rush of warmth cascade through him at the very word on Felix’s tongue. Did he really believe in soulmates or was it just something sweet to say about his friends who’d been hopelessly pining for years now?

He wanted to ask Felix what he believed. He wanted to ask him what he thought soulmates looked like and how it felt and if he thought he had one and if he thought it could be him.

But he felt a little tug to the safety pin in his ear, gentle and careful, that pulled him back to reality. His eyes focused back on the little blond staring up at him with a tentative smile.

Hyunjin cleared his throat, hoping it would clear out his brain too and said, “I’m sure they’ll figure it out.”

But as the days carried on, they were most definitely *not* figuring it out and at this rate, Felix was starting to shed. And not a figurative like, ‘pulling his hair out’ kind of thing. But a literal ‘petting his tail pulled out handfuls of fur’ kind of way. Felix explained it was a common anxiety response for a lot of mammal hybrids when they were worried or stressed and he was no exception. And Hyunjin was sure he would have a similar response because after two weeks, Jisung was *still* avoiding Minho like the plague.

They were never at the lunch table at the same time. The few times Jisung *did* show up, he looked tired and borderline frail, like he hadn’t been sleeping. His energy was low, which was *stark* on someone like the bubbly brunette. But the second Minho would appear with his tray

of salad and wild eyes that looked like they'd just seen a ghost, Jisung was suddenly on his feet, muttering some obvious excuse about needing to go talk to his Spanish teacher or forgetting something in his locker or, one time, even going to feed his dog.

Hyunjin checked with the table and sure enough, Jisung did not own a dog.

But even *more* frustrating was watching Minho do *nothing.* He would clench his jaw and watch Jisung walk away time and time again and Hyunjin was so fucking close to grabbing him by the shoulders and *demanding* he chase after him.

As a diehard romantic, it was *painful* to watch them play this odd game of cat and mouse where no one fucking won.

And if that hadn't been enough to rub salt in the wound of a '*Love in the Air'* homecoming theme, it seemed that the entire group was growing increasingly stressed with the upcoming midterms. Chan, as student class president, was in charge of making sure homecoming even *happened* at all. He'd conscripted Felix and Jeongin for the party planning team while Binnie was running himself ragged at cheer practice, determined that every routine be *perfect* for the big game.

Hyunjin was desperately trying to balance tutoring Jeongin during their scraps of free time at lunch, bound and determined to keep the boy from failing art history, and receiving his own tutoring from a depressed Minho.

It was all so confusing. Hyunjin had never been a part of a friend group before so he had precisely zero experience in what to do when it fractured. He could *feel* the rift between Minho and Jisung from down the table and it was driving him crazy, ratcheting up his anxiety in ways he couldn't explain.

And he so desperately wanted to talk to Felix about it and see if he felt the same way and, if he was, if he was *handling* it okay. But Felix was busy with cheer and planning for homecoming and midterms studies and *getting asked to homecoming.*

Hyunjin swore, it happened at *least* once a day. Sometimes in the hall between class or beside their lockers. Sometimes it was during lunch, the entire table going silent as some poor person stumbled their way through a sweet but ultimately futile '*Will you go to homecoming with me?'*

Because Felix had turned every single person down so far with a sad smile and a soft rejection. Hyunjin felt bad for those people. Not because they'd been turned down, god no. He was *delighted* that Felix was apparently unavailable for them but he felt bad because there was no way any of them left that failed attempt feeling any less in love with Felix than they did before.

He set down their shattered hearts like one would a baby bird. He smiled, telling them he was genuinely so flattered but he wasn't interested. It was the nicest no Hyunjin had ever heard and more than one suitor left the encounter by thanking him.

It was a master class in poise and kindness and if it didn't make Hyunjin want to die a little bit every time someone approached his future husband, he'd probably be asking for lessons.

But instead, he just observed, hyperventilating as quietly as humanly possible so as to not to cause a scene or interrupt. If Felix ever *did* say yes to someone, he just sincerely hoped that his funeral wouldn't be held on the same day as homecoming so the blond could attend.

By the third week, Hyunjin could tell the stress of the Minsung drama was eating Felix alive, alongside all of the homecoming and midterm prep. He could see it in his eyes when they'd exchange rushed words at their locker in the morning. He could see it in the droopy tips of his little ears during study hall, the way he struggled to keep his eyes open and the way, more than once, he shoved his desk close enough so he could lean a head on Hyunjin's shoulder and actually take a little cat nap.

It made Hyunjin want to wrap him up and take him somewhere far away with plenty of pillows and fluffy blankets and a solid 12 hours made for napping.

And by the first Friday of October, two weeks out from homecoming, it apparently wasn't just him feeling that way anymore.

He was racing to study hall, eager to offer his shoulder to a sleepy blond if needed when he stopped dead in his tracks. Because said blond was standing across the hall from their open classroom, facing a man in a letterman jacket and wearing his patented '*I'm listening and I appreciate this but the answer is no'* face.

Another homecoming ask. This was number four. At least from what Hyunjin had personally been unlucky enough to witness.

He didn't mean to eavesdrop but the warning bell had rung four minutes ago, meaning he had one minute until he was officially late. And yeah, the teacher overseeing study hall was more interested in whatever game they played on their phone, never admonished volume levels or took roll but *still.*

Trying his hardest not to breathe as he headed for the doorway, he was going to just sneak past when a blond bombshell slammed into his side, gripping his arm almost violently.

"Jin Jin! There you are!"

Hyunjin's eyes snapped up, wide and shocked as he took in the almost feral look of relief on Felix's face.

"I, uh-"

"Thanks so much for offering to escort me to homecoming, Seongwa but I uh, I'm already going with Hyunjin."

The aforementioned Hyunjin had exited the chat of life abruptly upon hearing those words. "You, I-I…*we?"*

Had he missed this? *How* has he missed this? Surely, he hasn't been so painfully oblivious as to somehow *miss* the fact that he was Felix's date to *fucking* homecoming.

Right?!

His specific brand of delusion should have made it *impossible.*

"Oh! I uh, I-I'm so sorry!" Letterman jacket man said, eyes looking horrified as he took a shaky step back from Hyunjin. "I didn't know! I-I swear!"

A fresh wave of confusion hit as the man damn near bowed in apology, turned tail and *ran.*

The taller boy heard the blond at his elbow let out a monstrous sigh, dragging his limp, useless body across the threshold of the classroom just as the bell rang. He was dropped into his seat, still feeling dazed as the blond immediately dragged his desk over so he could sit shoulder to shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Jin Jin! I didn't mean to ambush you like that!"

"I-it's fine-"

“It’s just, I mean Seongwa is a nice guy and all. But he started asking me to homecoming and I panicked because I didn’t want to hurt his feelings but I *don’t* want to go to homecoming with him! So, and I mean, you just like *appeared!* Like a miracle or something.”

Hyunjin thought it was silly that a literal angel would compare *him* to a miracle. “I-I mean, it’s not like I’m *mad*-”

“It’s not like I planned it, ya know? It just, I *panicked.* And I just,” Felix paused, letting out another one of those big sighs and twisting his body to plead with his eyes for Hyunjin to understand. Even going so far as to gather both of Hyunjin’s limp, lifeless hands into his own, soothing tiny frantic thumbs over the backs of them.

“I’m so *tired of it,* Jin Jin!” He whined, his ears going pathetically droopy and his eyes going all big and shiny in a way that had Hyunjin aching to make it all better. “All the cheer practice and midterms studying and the homecoming decorating a-and the *Minnie and Jisung thing?*”

Hyunjin caught a fluffy flicker of movement out of the corner of his eyes, looking down to find Felix’s tail reaching for him like it wanted a hug of its own.

“Lix, it’s okay. I understand-”

“I just can’t handle all of *that* on top of it all.” He waved a dismissive hand toward the hallways that housed endless suitors for him.

The blond looked up from under his lashes, looking like he was willing to beg if needed. “So, I just…if I could just tell people I’m going with you…”

He trailed off, leaving the question unspoken but there.

Hyunjin felt the way his little fingers tightened on him, tinged with desperation like he needed Hyunjin to be his lifeline. His tether to safety. If Felix needed an anchor, he’d be more than happy to oblige.

“…I don’t have a suit.” Hyunjin stuttered out before feeling a blush *consume* him, body, mind and spirit. You didn’t need a suit for a hypothetical, fake date.

But he heard the most delicate snort from the man beside him before Felix broke into giggles. He flopped his head onto Hyunjin’s shoulder, his little ears tickling the side of his neck in a dizzying sort of way.

“You don’t *actually* have to escort me, Jin Jin.” Felix said through giggles and Hyunjin had to bite his lip to keep from saying *but what if I want to?*

Because Felix needed help right now. He was clearly stressed and overwhelmed and if this was how he could help, then he’d gladly do it. He didn’t want to *add* to it by becoming some other guy he needed to let down gently.

He heard a sigh come from the blond before his entire body sagged. He couldn’t help but glance around the room, wondering if anyone was noticing this. But thankfully, his peers were either studying for midterms or catching up on sleep, due to late night studying for midterms. The teacher, as per usual, was scrolling endlessly on their phone.

“I’m so tired, Jin Jin.” Felix whispered, his tail daringly trying to sneak behind Hyunjin’s back and the chair so it could wrap around him. “I feel like I haven’t had any time to just…*be*, ya know?”

The brunette nodded, carefully tilting his head to lay softly on top of Felix’s. “Yeah, I do.” He felt the mounting stress too. He wasn’t sure how you *couldn’t* this time of semester.

He slowly reached up, not wanting to frighten Felix when he threaded his fingers in the back of his hair, trying to reach towards his ears for some scratches.

He felt even more of the blond’s weight lean into him at the gesture and the whisper thin words, “It’s been so long,”

And yeah, it *had* been a while. Probably since that day at Felix’s house, around the table with his parents. *Weeks* ago.

They’d been so busy, pulled in so many directions that Hyunjin hadn’t even registered it. He’d been trying so hard to just not crumble at the idea of Felix getting a date to the dance. Sure, he’d missed their fun little chats that had devolved into the verbal equivalent of doom scrolling about Minho and Jisung. He’d noticed how they spend study hall *actually* studying, but tests were looming so it was only the responsible thing to do. And sure, he’d spent his weekends alone, going on long runs to quiet his mind or studying or falling asleep embarrassingly early when the calculus lulled him to oblivion.

But he’d never considered that maybe Felix noticed it too. That maybe he missed their chats and the levity. Maybe he too craved a little less

responsibility or a lazy Saturday that wasn't consumed with reading textbooks.

Maybe he wanted ear scratches and play time.

"Jin Jin?" Felix asked, pulling his heavy head off of Hyunjin's shoulder like it weighed a million pounds. "Will you come over tonight?"

Hyunjin looked down to find wide, soft eyes gazing up at him. He looked so hopeful.

"We can study or something-" He started to offer.

But Hyunjin cut him off, an unknown sort of confidence welling up in him. "No. No studying." He said, reaching out again and giving the tip of Felix's ear a little tug. "Let's just play."

He watched Felix's ears perk up, his tail batting against Hyunjin's side with renewed energy. "Really?"

Hyunjin nodded, a smile pulling at his lips at the reaction. "Yeah. It's been a while." He echoed the blond's earlier words.

And Felix's smile was melting and full moon worthy. "It really has."

He sounded relieved. Hyunjin swore he could *feel* the tension bleeding out of him and the idea that *he* could be the one to promote that? It felt good. It felt like perhaps having a little confidence wasn't such a bad thing.

They spent the rest of study hall actually studying. Felix peeled himself off of Hyunjin, much to the taller man's sadness but kept close. There was something about him that seemed small today. Almost like the weight of all the stress was bowing his shoulders and making him cave in.

Hyunjin missed the decadent sprawl that was a kitten after a good play session.

When the bell finally rang, releasing them for the day, Felix stood immediately, bouncing on his toes. He was beaming at Hyunjin, his half open backpack already thrown over his shoulders. His full body excitement had all his keychains shivering along with him, almost like a windchime.

Hyunjin couldn't help but smile fondly as he reached around the blond and tugged the zipper up before he could lose anything important.

"Did you bring your helmet?"

Felix deflated in an instant, his ears drooping dramatically as lips fell into a frown.

Hyunjin would take that as a no, then. He ducked down, trying to catch Felix's falling eyes.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. This just means I can stop by my house and drop my backpack off. And you can like, I don't know, warn your parents that you invited a guest over."

Felix rolled his eyes, starting to finally move toward the door. "Please. They *love* you. They keep asking when you're coming back over."

Hyunjin had to bite his lip to contain his smile. "Yeah. My uh…my parents keep asking the same thing."

He wondered if their parents would get along. He thought they might. His mom and Ara both liked to cook and they both liked to embarrass their sons so as far as Hyunjing was concerned, they already had a lot in common. And honestly, Gang-min had a similar bone deep kindness to him that reminded Hyunjin of his own dad.

He looked down in time to see Felix biting his lip in a very similar fashion, a rosy little glow to his cheeks as he hummed like it made him happy.

They stopped at their lockers, loading themselves down with everything they would need for the weekend before making their way outside.

"Okay so, you're gonna come over, right?" Felix asked, an edge of nervousness to his voice.

Hyunjin nodded in affirmation, shoving his helmet over his head and starting to move toward his bike.

"A-and we're gonna, like, you really don't mind if we just…*play*? Like…kitten time?" He whispered the last part like it was a secret, face bright red and his little fingers gripping his tail like if he let go, it would float away.

The brunette smiled, aching to reach out and peel his delicate fingers from his tail. “Of course, Lixie. I told you. It’s fun for me too.”

Felix took a deep breath, nodding once like he was *deciding* to believe this. “Okay. Then…see you soon?”

“I’ll text when I’m on my way.” Hyunjin assured him.

The blond gave him another lip biting smile that reeked of giddy excitement before turning to run through the parking lot.

Where he was finding this energy after looking half dead all week, Hyunjin wasn’t sure but god, it felt good to see him all smiley and happy again. He hadn’t realized just how much he had missed that.

Determined not to spend too much time apart, Hyunjin threw his leg over his bike, finally sitting down so he could make the quick trip home.

As soon as he parked and shut the bike off in his driveway, he was racing for the door, a million and one ideas running through his head.

Felix had been stressed lately, as they all had been and he was reaching out to *Hyunjin* for help. He had placed his trust in Hyunjin, of all people. He’d been chosen over life long friends and he was *determined* to prove to Felix that he was worthy.

“Welcome home, Bambi!” His mom called from upstairs when she heard the door open.

Hyunjin followed the sound, finding her in her bedroom folding a load of laundry on the bed.

“Hey mom,” He said, a little breathless from the stairs. “I’m uh, I’m going over to Felix’s. If that’s okay?”

It was a silly question but he still felt it was polite to double check.

“Of *course,* that’s okay! Tell that little angel I said hello, okay?”

Hyunjin blushed but nodded.

“Will you be home for dinner?” His mom asked.

Hyunjin paused. “I’m not sure. Maybe? Maybe not?” It was a Friday night after all so he supposed they had more time. But then again, Hyunjin wasn’t sure if he actually had something like a curfew. It had

never come up since he never went anywhere or did anything.

His mom took his answer in stride though, nodding thoughtfully. “Well, just keep me posted, okay?”

He nodded, before taking off down the hall towards his room. He dumped his bag unceremoniously on the floor, even going so far as to give it a little rebellious kick that really just hurt his toe more than anything. He scowled at it but moved on, those ideas from earlier swimming in his head.

It was Operation: Kitten Time and he was bound and determined to bring Felix a good night that made him forget all of the stressors of the season.

He changed into a pair of looser jeans, something still safe for riding his bike but comfy enough to lounge in. He thought about throwing on one of his favorite flannels to fight the chill but decided to swap it out for something softer. Something more suited for cuddles, on the off chance that Felix wanted to go full lap cat again.

He chose a light gray sweater, nothing terribly inspired but it was soft and cozy and would keep him warm under his leather jacket.

He grabbed the laser pointer from his desk drawer along with the wad of yarn they'd played with before. He grabbed a small cross body bag to stow them away in, keeping them close to his heart, where they belonged.

But that wasn't going to be enough. Not for Operation: Kitten Time. Tonight was supposed to be something special. At least, that's what Hyunjin had deluded himself into believing. After all, he'd been asked to be Felix's fake homecoming date and *dammit,* he took that job very seriously. If anything, it was basically a promotion from tall, awkward friend with the motorcycle to like…tall, awkward friend with the motorcycle who *also* was acting as scapegoat to help keep potential suitors at bay.

So yeah, it was a big deal.

Hyunjin eyed his diary below the kitten toys in his desk drawer and nodded at it, as if to say *‘I have so much to tell you later.’*

He closed the drawer and pulled his phone out, googling the ambiguous ‘*What do cats like?’.* This ended up being a terrible idea because Hyunjin was overwhelmed with options and no way to

decipher which ones were applicable to Felix.

He also was faced with several ideas that he had no way of controlling. He *knew* Felix loved naps in the sun; he'd told him as much. But Hyunjin, despite his best efforts, could not construct a perfectly placed sun beam for him and yes, he hated himself a little for it.

After saving a few large cat trees to his Amazon shopping cart for potential Christmas gift ideas, he checked his appearance in the mirror, tugging the tufts of his short hair into something a little cleaner.

Sometimes he misses his long locks and the way he could tie them back into something simple and presentable. But at this current length - no longer a buzz cut but too short to do much with - he felt like every day was a roll of the dice.

He sighed, giving up pretty quickly and deciding he'd just have to continue in full hedgehog.

He checked his mom's room but, finding it empty, made his way downstairs. He found her in the living room, feet up on the coffee table and a small mountain of magazines beside her that she'd been meaning to catch up on.

“Heading out?” She asked, smiling up at him.

He nodded. “Yeah. I uh, I'll text about dinner.”

She smiled and shooed him away, telling him to have fun and reminding him to tell Felix hello for her.

He shoved his boots back on at the front door and raced to his bike.

It was time for step two of Operation: Kitten Time

Without the luxury of cupholders, Hyunjin couldn't grab the blond hot chocolate like last time but, according to the internet and Hyunjin's limited knowledge of cats, they liked treats. And good kittens should get plenty of treats.

So Hyunjin stopped at the same coffee shop as last time but this time ordered from the glass display case filled with baked goods. He settled on a few little cookies, different flavors and kinds so he could learn what Felix liked. He even grabbed one for himself because he could

already see the way Felix would *pout* if Hyunjin didn't have a treat himself.

He was able to fold the little paper bag up neatly, carefully tucking it into his bag.

Onto step three.

Easily the most critical and potentially catastrophic step. He fired up the bike and motored over a few blocks to the pet store.

Felix *loved* the yarn. He *loved* The laser pointer. But Hyunjin wanted to get him something new. Something specially made for just his kitten side. Not just random supplies Hyunjin had found stashed around his house.

He entered the store, desperately hoping no one would ask him the name of his pet.

He beelined it for the aisles of cat food, assuming that would get him in the right general area and was abruptly slapped in the face with an entire *aisle* of choices.

There were catnip mice and ribbon wands, crinkly plushies and plastic balls with little bells in them. They sold bright foil balls that made a satisfying crunch when you squeezed them but also high tech toys that had batteries and motors and fucking *apps* to pair.

Hyunjin stood, wide eyed and frozen as he tried to figure out just what on *earth* Felix would like.

He liked the yarn and the laser pointer and both were things he had to chase. So maybe something like that would be a good place to start?

Hyunjin picked a bright pink wand that had a long string ending in a little bird plush that was covered in feathers.

But he couldn't help it when his eyes were drawn to the plushies. He hadn't seen Felix's room the last time he went over but he would bet *actual money* that Felix was a plushies kind of guy. He loved cute things and cuddles. It was only logical.

Hyunjin spent a good five minutes debating between several options and finally decided that the soft, fluffy donut with pink icing, a smiling face and sprinkles, was the winner.

He only had room in his bag for one more thing and decided to just grab a pack of little mice. Even if Felix didn't think they were fun, he supposed he could make them into keychains or something.

He went to the checkout counter, smiling when the cashier cooed at the plushie and thankful beyond belief that they didn't ask how old his cat was.

He stowed everything away in his little bag, having to stop outside the store to open all the packaging and recycle it so they would fit.

If anyone looked inside his bag, they'd probably assume he was on his way to adopt a cat, not hang out with his crush.

He zipped his bag back up and got back on his bike, shooting a quick text to Felix with his promised ‘on my way ‘ text before pulling out of the little parking lot and back onto the road.

It took him a total of ten minutes to get there, only because he'd hit every single red light along the way.

He parked and shut off the bike, a little thrum of excitement humming in his chest like a live wire. He loved the heart melting smiles that kitten time brought. He loved knowing that Felix was comfortable enough with him to let go and just *be.* He loved the chance to just *play* with someone. It was an experience he'd missed growing up and something about this was healing a broken little piece of him. It was healing that lonely little kid who'd never had a friend to chase around. Who'd never been able to laugh and run and be rowdy.

He'd always thought it was too late.

But with Felix? Anything was possible, apparently.

Hyunjin pulled his helmet off and nervously patted down his hair as he approached the front door. He rang the doorbell and stepped back.

Almost immediately, the door creaked open. But there was no one in sight. That was, until Hyunjin saw two twin hands holding the edge of the door and two little ears peaking around. The eyes that followed were already wide and ready to play.

Hyunjin felt a smile blooming in his face, his excitement cresting. Had Felix been waiting by the door for him? Ready to pounce?

“Lixie?” He asked, his voice bright and joyful.

He heard a happy chitter and saw a fluffy tail curl around in interest. He leaned further around the door before ducking back. Hiding.

Hyunjin giggled, unzipping his cross body bag and removing the wand toy. Like he was trying to catch a fish, he tossed the string out, into the house where Felix could clearly see it.

Bingo.

Felix hopped into action immediately, jumping as high as he could to catch the feathery bird on the end. But Hyunjin was ready. He pulled the toy up and *just* out of reach while finally taking a step inside. He shut the door behind him and started waving the wand around and around, sending Felix on laps around the foyer.

But they needed more space. At this rate, even Hyunjin's height couldn't keep the game going for long. It was time for a diversion.

One hand still raising the wand high, making the little bird fly and sending Felix into some grand, yet fruitless, leaps, his other hand snuck into his bag.

His fingers found what he was looking for, pulling it out and calling, “Lixie! Look!”

Black eyes whipped to the sound of the little toy mouse being shaken, instantly zeroing in on the new toy.

“Look, Lixie, look!” Hyunjin said excitedly before tossing the mouse up and over his head, towards the living room.

Felix took off like a shot, Hyunjin chasing after with a huge smile in place. It had worked like a dream.

He skidded to a stop once his feet hit the carpet, Felix half under the couch and he tried to grab the mouse they had apparently slid underneath.

Stifling a laugh, Hyunjin grabbed another toy mouse from his bag and shook it.

The blond froze at the sound of the rattling.

Hyunjin shook it again and Felix backed out from the couch, bits of dust clinging to his platinum hair and ears twitching as he found the source of the sound.

Hyunjin shook it again.

Felix bunched up, deadly still. Every muscle in his body tensed.

Hyunjin raised his arm, and flung it to the side and Felix was *off!*

He raced in the direction, searching frantically for it and only stopping when he heard the brunette laughing behind him.

He turned back around to find Hyunjin dangling the mouse by its tail. He'd faked the throw, wondering if it would actually work.

Felix looked at him with wide, confused eyes before snorting and rolling them. Highly unimpressed.

Something about the sassy little gesture only made Hyunjin giggle more. Meanwhile, Felix's eyes had narrowed, thoroughly unimpressed with the trick.

“Aw, come on Lix, I was kidding.” Hyunjin said, barely able to say it with a straight face.

“Uh huh,” Felix said, turning away with an authoritative swish of the tail.

“I won't do it again. I'm sorry!” But his apology was cheapened substantially by his chuckles.

He heard a little huff from the blond where he was astutely looking away, arms crossed over his chest.

It was time to bust out the big guns then.

Hyunjin pulled out the laser pointer.

He shone the little red dot over by Felix’s slippered feet. He was swimming in sweats, in easily the most casual outfit Hyunjin had ever seen him in to date.

While his brown eyes *definitely* followed, he stood stubbornly rooted in his spot.

Hyunjin inched the light closer to him. Felix bristled, his tail starting to poof up. But still, he remained unmoved.

Hyunjin was about to drag the little red dot over his toes but decided at the last minute to switch tactics. The red dot disappeared, Felix's

eyes going wide with confusion and fright.

“Lixie!” Hyunjin called, shining the laser pointer directly on the floor, advancing toward *him!*

“Lix, help!”

“Jin Jin!” The blond yelped and jumped into action, nearly face planting onto the ground as he grappled with the red dot for Hyunjin's life. He battled valiantly, determined to save Hyunjin from the evil laser. He trapped it over and over even as it somehow evaded his grasp.

The game kept up until Hyunjin noticed Felix's ragged breathing. He flickered the laser pointer off and returned it to his bag, Felix still sprawled on the floor and ready to pounce.

“Thanks for saving me, Lixie.” Hyunjin said quietly, trying to gently bring him back. “I'm safe now. You killed it.”

The blond took a deep breath in and slowly let it out. His muscles relaxed a bit as he slowly stood, still a bit wary.

“Do you want a treat?”

Felix's ears and tail both perked up at that before the blond leveled him a skeptical pout. “It better not be fucking cat treats.”

Something about the fluffy tail and the word *fuck* on his lips was too funny. The juxtaposition too strong. And Hyunjin could only snort and shake his head.

Wordlessly, he pulled the bag of cookies from his bag and watched as Felix melted in relief and adoration.

“Oh my god, you're my favorite Jin Jin.”

The brunette tried not to let those words get to his head.

Felix rushed over excitedly, making grabby hands for the bag and eagerly surveying the selection when Hyunjin handed it over.

The brunette took a seat on the couch, finally pulling his bag off and setting it on the floor. He hadn't even been the one running around and yet he was sort of tired.

“Please tell me you got yourself a cookie,” Felix said, mouth already

full of food and making Hyunjin smile.

He had *known* he would ask.

“The lemon one.” He said and Felix smiled, looking almost relieved as he plucked the bright yellow cookie out and handed it over before flopping back onto the couch.

The blond wasted no time in cuddling right up. He curled up tight, and tipped his head over to rest on Hyunjin's shoulder.

They ate their treats silently. Felix was alternating between trying to eat, purr and catch his breath while Hyunjin was just trying to keep his soul in his body.

Eventually, Felix finished his cookies and resettled himself more firmly against Hyunjin as his purr became louder. He seemed so happy.

“Was that fun?” Hyunjin couldn't help but ask quietly, the fondness in his voice still too loud.

Felix nodded heartily before grabbing Hyunjin's hand and placing it on his ear. A very non subtle way to request some ear pets.

Hyunjin laughed under his breath but easily complied. After all, who wouldn't want to give the sweetest kitten some much deserved love?

“Thank you, Jin Jin.” Felix whispered, sinking further into his pets. He was edging closer, reminding Hyunjin of the sleepover and the revelation that Lixie was a lap cat.

“For what?” Hyunjin asked. He thought the answer would be something light. A polite thank you for the play time. Or the pets or the cookie. But instead, the blond sagged against him, heavier than before and starting to drape into his lap a little.

“Thank you for liking me for me. All of me. Even if it's a little weird.”

Hyunjin's fingers froze, the weight of Felix's words stunning him until the blond whined and pressed insistently against his hand.

He resumed his pets. “Of course, Lixie. It would be impossible not to.”

“I don't know about *impossible* but…for what it's worth, I feel the same about you.”

Two people, hiding parts of themselves. Two people who could be *whole* around one another.

“Yeah?” He asked, feeling his heart rate pick up in his chest.

Felix pulled back a little. Hyunjin's hand still on his head. Fingers in his hair, drifting at the base of his ears.

“Yeah.”

The blond had pulled back but not a lot. Not enough. His face was so close.

Hyunjin could see that he'd scrubbed his makeup off. His cheeks were filled with constellations.

“You make me feel lots of things.” Felix said, his voice a low, steady rumble that pulled Hyunjin in.

“Yeah?” He asked, in a trace. He wanted to be closer. To know what that voice would feel like over his lips. “Like what?”

A slow blink. The kind cats gave when they loved you. “Like…warm.” He said and was Hyunjin dreaming or was he drifting closer too?

“Warm and, I dunno. Safe.” His eyes were so open, so genuine, so melty. “You’re always saving me.”

“You saved me too.”

Saved me from loneliness. Saved me from spending another year at empty lunch tables and lonely Friday nights and deadly silent text notifications. Saved me from that painful look in my mom's eyes each time she realized I had no friends.

Saved me from myself.

A flicker of a smile lit up Felix's lips and Hyunjin *swore* he could almost feel it. That he *would* feel it.

He was *going* to feel it.

“Oh! Hyunjin! I didn't know you were here already.”

Hyunjin nearly yelped, caught off guard by the merry voice of Ara behind him.

Felix's eye blew up to twice their size, nearly falling on his face as he sprang back.

The world came flooding back in as Hyunjin took a deep, gasping breath in. Had he really stopped breathing?

But one look at Felix's bright blush confirmed it: yes he had. Because Felix and he were about to…had they really been about to-

“Lix? Are you…purring?” Ara asked, her head cocked to the side as she clocked the noise.

It abruptly stopped after having been questioned, Felix’s eyes going wide like he was in trouble.

“Um…yeah?” He sounded nervous and Hyunjin had to wonder if he’d done something wrong until a little memory popped into the back of his head. One of Felix telling him for the first time that he purred, but only when he was happy or sleepy. And *only* around his parents.

It explained Ara’s stunned expression, the way her frozen lips were starting to crack upward, a little fire starting low in her deep, dark eyes.

“Oh,” She said simply, her eyes falling on Hyunjin before her smile broadened even more. Her eyes slid off of him and to the ground to his bag, cat toys spilling out of it. “And this is…?” She asked, a lilt to her voice that told Hyunjin she already knew.

“We were just playing,” Felix said quietly, that nervousness still in his voice.

Was he embarrassed? Ashamed? Or was it something else that Hyunjin didn’t understand? Some kind of silent communication between mother and son as Hyunjin was being allowed in on something that had previously been a family only affair.

But Ara’s eyes only got softer. “Oh Lixie, you haven’t played in so long,” She cooed, hands clasped over her heart like it was all she could do to contain herself. Like she needed to trap the excess of love trying to pour out.

The blond grew pink beside him, subtly huddling back into Hyunjin’s side like he could hide there. And hey, if that’s what helped then he would be more than happy to oblige.

“*Moooom,”* he whined.

“What?” Ara asked, eyes wide and falling on Hyunjin. “Oh when Lixie was little, he *loved* to play! Yarn, wands, mice, all of it! The doctor said it was actually a good sign of development for a hybrid so we played all the time.”

She sighed happily, obviously remembering long ago memories of her son getting tangled in string or chasing after a toy mouse. She finally shrugged, her smile soft and almost a bit forlorn. “But kids grow up. Don’t play as much, even hybrids I guess. But I always worried a little…”

She trailed off, thinking through her words before continuing. “Felix’s uncle is married to a hybrid.”

“A bunny hybrid, right?”

Her smile only grew, pleased. “Yes. And I know he’s said it’s important to stay connected to your instincts. And I worried that I wouldn’t be able to help Lixie with that.”

“I’m still in the room, mom,” Felix said, face now a bright red as his little fingers dug into Hyunjin’s arm.

“I know, I know,” She said with an eye roll, “But I worry, Lix.”

Her eyes slid back over to Hyunjin as she added, “But a little less so now.”

It was Hyunjin’s turn to blush, feeling a wave of solid *pride* wash over him. It felt like he was earning some kind of blessing. He felt *useful* and *special.*

He felt Felix scoot closer again, his head finally falling back onto Hyunjin’s shoulder like he was too exhausted to hide their cuddling from his mom anymore. He let out a huge sigh and grabbed Hyunjin’s hand, placing it back on his head for more pets. “Same.” He said simply.

Hyunjin’s fingers moved on autopilot, burying themselves under thick layers of platinum hair and soft, downy fluff.

“Jin Jin, can you stay for dinner?” He asked, voice small.

He nodded but looked to Ara. “I can but only if that’s okay?”

Ara smiled easily. “Of course, Hyunnie. You’re always welcome here. I’ll let you know when it’s ready.” And with that, she left the room, leaving them to their own devices.

Hyunjin texted his parents, letting them know he had indeed been invited to stay for dinner to which his mother had responded with a *deluge* of emojis and then ‘ok’ with a *goddamn winky face.*

Which somehow turned into Hyunjin stretched out on the couch, head pillowed on the armrest while Felix curled up beside him, loving on the plush donut Hyunjin had bought him. He kept headbutting it, dragging his forehead across it and, when he thought Hyunjin wasn’t looking, giving it little bites like he wanted to test it.

But Hyunjin was always watching. Not in a creepy, big brother sort of way. But in a completely enamored sort of way.

It was *impossible* to pay attention to the horrors of the world that were currently playing on the evening news when he had the most adorable kitten hybrid curled into his side and enjoying the little gift he’d given him.

He wanted more nights like this. Simple and somehow both electric and lazy at the same time.

Felix sighed, the sound suffering and long.

“You doing alright, Lix?” Hyunjin asked, hands still petting his head.

Another sigh. “Yeah, I just…this time of year is always tough, ya know? With mid-terms and homecoming, that’s usually enough to stress me out. But now with the Minho and Jisung thing? I just…I worry.”

Hyunjin nodded in sympathy. “I get that. I don’t like the Minsung thing either.”

“They’re *best friends!* They should be able to fix this but I swear Jin Jin, if they can’t? I *will* and goddammit, they are going to live happily ever after.”

The brunette had to laugh at Felix’s aggressive stance but he also sort of had to agree. “Maybe it’s time we stepped in. Got reinforcements?”

To be fair, he’d been thinking about it after the first week passed with zero resolution. It was *painful* for him to watch so he could only

imagine how the rest of them felt. Especially those who had been watching it play out for *years.*

Felix nodded with another long sigh. “Yeah. I think it’s time. I’ll text the group chat.”

Hyunjin heard the little ping on his phone, somewhere down by his bag probably but paid it no mind. Instead offering, “And as for the other stuff well…I mean, mid-terms *will* end eventually. And homecoming, I mean, you’ve got yourself a scapegoat now so hopefully that will help?”

Felix giggled, snuggling back into Hyunjin’s side and muttering. “Yeah, a scapegoat who would look *great* in a suit.”

And Hyunjin had a crazy idea. Utterly crazy.

“I mean…if you really wanted to make it convincing…I could get a suit.”

There was a beat of silence and Felix had gone still but Hyunjin fought through his fear and doubt and the doubletime rhythm of his heartbeats to add. “Like, I could…escort you.”

Another beat of silence before he hurriedly added. “Just so, ya know, it’s convincing or whatever.”

“I mean, it would sort of ruin the illusion if I went to homecoming alone or not at all.”

“Exactly.” Hyunjin concurred logically.

“And I wouldn’t want people to know I’d *lied* about having a date.”

“That would be bad form,” He agreed, feeling a fluttering, fleeting kind of hope deep in his belly.

Felix hummed in agreement like he was mulling it over before propping himself up enough to look at Hyunjin. “Would you like to see my dress?” He asked, eyes bright. “So you can, ya know, match your tie to the color.”

Was that a yes?

“I’d love to see your dress.” He said, mouth going dry at the thought of Felix walking down the stairs in a pretty dress, eyes only on him.

But just as Felix sprang up, excitement clear on his face, Ara called them for dinner. The blond pouted in the direction of the kitchen but ended up shrugging. “Fine, *after* dinner?”

Hyunjin nodded in return, standing up and stretching his arms high above his head. “After dinner,” He agreed.

They made their way to the kitchen, the smell of something warm and delicious wafting through the air. Hyunjin’s stomach growled viciously, reminding him he hadn't eaten since lunch.

“Oh, is that a new toy?”

Hyunjin looked over in time to realize that Felix was still holding his plushie to his chest. He hurriedly set it on the counter as a blush spread.

“Uh, yeah. Jinnie brought it.”

“How thoughtful,” Ara said with an easy smile, not missing a beat. She shot a wink over to Hyunjin and while he had zero idea what it meant, it probably wasn't a bad thing so he offered a pitifully weak smile back and sat down.

Dinner was delicious and Hyunjin mostly kept his head bent, carefully cooling his soup before shoveling it into his face. It was *so* good and something about a warm belly and the chilly air outside and the tinkling laugh of Felix beside him felt like *home.* He felt content in a way he rarely was around people outside his own family.

He didn't know if it was too soon to say he felt like he belonged but…

He really hoped he was invited to dinner again.

And in an effort to secure that invitation, he offered to clean and was *handedly* shot down by a wide-grinned Gang-Min who instead told them to “go play” like a couple of grade schoolers.

But Hyunjin couldn't be too mad when Felix whirled around, beaming up at Hyunjin. “Can I show you my dress now?”

“Your dress?” Ara asked, a look of blatant hope on her face.

And Felix, perky and oblivious as ever merely nodded excitedly, bouncing on his toes. “Yeah! My homecoming dress! Jin Jin needs to know the color so he can get a matching tie!”

A pan fell in the background, slipping right out of Gang-Min’s soapy hands. Ara’s mouth was stuck in a perfect little circle, eyes ping ponging back and forth between Hyunjin and her son.

“A-a tie?”

Still delightfully oblivious, Felix's tail was swaying casually, swishing back and forth with nary a worry as he nodded. “Mhm! So we can coordinate!”

With that the blond grabbed Hyunjin's hand and turned like he was ready to lead him up the stairs when Ara’s voice rang out after them.

“Lee Yongbok! Are you telling me that you have a *date* for homecoming and *didn't tell me*?”

The tone made Hyunjin's blood run cold. It didn't sound angry, necessary. But it sounded ripe with emotion. They turned to find Ara, eyes wide and her hands clasped hopefully in front of her chest like she was mid prayer.

Felix blinked before his eyes raced up to Hyunjin, glancing at him quickly before a blush flooded his entire face, finally understanding.

He let go of Hyunjin's hand in a hurry, hopping back like he's been burned and palms up in surrender. “No! N-no, it's not like that! He's just *escorting* me as a favor! Jin Jin would never- I mean, it's not like *that!”*

There was some sort of rushed explanation and this weird fall to Felix's parents' faces, but Hyunjin couldn't really follow along because he was stuck on the thing Felix hadn't said.

Jin Jin would never-

Jin Jin would never what? What did Felix think he wouldn't do?

Because *surely* he hadn't been about to imply that Hyunjin would never ask Felix out, right? Like, in the sense that he'd probably never have the balls to do it, sure. But if the blond thought for one, *single second* that Hyunjin wouldn't be interested because something about Felix wasn't appealing enough?

Then they had a fucking problem.

“Oh,” Ara said, looking a bit deflated as she resumed wiping the

counters down. “Well, that's very kind of Hyunjin.”

He thought he might have nodded errantly before Felix pulled him away, his little fingers somehow feeling nervous around Hyunjin's wrist.

Jin Jin would never-

“Hey Lix? What-”

“Okay you have to wait out here, okay? I got to put it on to give the full effect!”

And then Felix's face was replaced by a cheap wooden door and Hyunjin was left in the hallway, that same damn phrase running around and around in his head.

He knew Felix had insecurities. He'd *told* him of his worries around his ears and tail. How he worried people would single him out as *the* hybrid and nothing else. How he feared people wouldn't see *him* but just a kitten.

But there was the other stuff too. The way he hid his freckles away under layers of foundation. How he'd been embarrassed the first time he'd seen Hyunjin without his makeup on.

What if there was more? What if Felix looked in the mirror and didn't like what he saw? What if the confident little way he owned cuteness like a brand was actually a shield he hid behind?

Or worse, what if he thought there was something wrong with *him*. Not how he looked but what if Felix didn't like his laugh or his smile or the way his voice sounded? What if he thought he was too loud or too chaotic or too pushy or too *much?*

Jin Jin would never-

He would do *anything* for Felix. *Anything.*

All he ever needed to do was ask.

“Jin Jin? Are you ready?”

Hyunjin snapped back to reality, the spiral he'd been sucked into stilling at the voice behind the door.

He had to clear his throat twice before croaking out, “Y-yeah. Ready.”

False.

He was *not* ready.

Because Felix opened that door, his hair tumbling over his shoulders in sloppy waves and his freckles stark in the low light of the hallway and his face was drenched in the most rosey, dusty pink color.

Where Hyunjin had expected his dress to be flirty and fun, full of ruffles and bounce, he was stunned to see a simple dress in its place.

It was deep, rose red, just like the one hanging in Hyunjin's locker, long since dried. It draped peacefully over his body, cascading over his hips in gentle sweeps and leading to an asymmetrical hemline that teasingly reached past to his knees on one side. It looked like art, the way it hugged his curves. The way it left his shoulders strong and exposed. The way there was a whisper thin, mostly sheer piece that draped off the side and twirled like curled ribbon.

“Is it…do I look okay?” Felix asked, a nervous edge to his voice.

Jin Jin would never-

“You look *perfect,* Lixie.”

The blond's eyes went wide, blinking in stunned shock a few times before he edged a bit closer, looking like he wanted to be hopeful. “Really?”

“Really.” Hyunjin said, taking his own step forward. He wanted to *touch* him. To hold his waist. To tip his chin back. To rebuild the almost moment in the living room when Felix had said that Hyunjin made him feel lots of things.

He wanted to know just what these things were. Intimately and completely.

“A fucking vision,” he whispered without realizing, floating forward and grabbing Felix’s hand in a daze. He raised it high, turning his kitten like a little ballerina to get the full view.

Felix giggled and spun, the pink to his cheeks seeming less worried and much more giddy.

But it was on the second spin that Hyunjin noticed something finally. “Wait…where's your tail?”

Felix looked behind himself like he too was shocked to find it gone before shrugging. “I sort of thought maybe I'd hide it this time?”

“Why?” Hyunjin asked, brow furrowed.

The blond merely shrugged again, looking uncomfortable. “It's just not very high fashion.”

“Says who?”

“I dunno, me?”

“Okay well neither is homecoming so what does it matter?” Hyunjin challenged.

Felix sighed, “I just want people focused on *me* and not the other stuff. Like my tail or whatever.”

“What people?”

“Huh?”

Hyunjin could feel his heart picking up speed, a desperation starting to settle inside of him at the sound of Felix's insecurities.

Jin Jin would never-

“You said you want people focused on *you.* What people?”

“I dunno, just *people.”*

*“*Who?”

“No one,” Felix pouted, refusing to look at Hyunjin.

Jin Jin would never-

“No one? Surely it has to be-”

“*Okay fine!* It's you, okay?”

Hyunjin froze, those words from earlier echoing in his head as Felix's fingers gripped his back fiercely.

“I just…I know I sort of forced you into this. And you're too nice to not help me out. But, I still want you to look at *me* in my dress and see *me.* To feel…I still want to make you proud.”

“Proud?” Hyunjin said, his head starting to feel numb.

The blond nodded, toeing the carpet under his feet shyly. “Yeah. Like…proud to stand beside me. As m-my date.” He looked up shyly before hurriedly adding, “even if it's fake.”

Jin Jin would never-

Hyunjin used his grip to yank Felix in, crashing him into his chest and wrapping him up tight with his too long arms.

Felix only froze for a second before he was holding Hyunjin back just as tightly, pressing his face into his chest like he wanted to *see* his heart and all of its intentions.

“Lix,” he whispered fervently into the top of his head, directly into his brain. “No matter what you're doing, no matter what you're wearing, no matter what you might be worried about, I am *always* focused on you. All of you.”

He heard a gasp against his chest before Felix was squeezing him even tighter.

They stood, swaying in the hallway for a few minutes, Hyunjin feeling oddly calm even with Felix’s close proximity.

Tonight was a bit confusing but he sort of liked it. He thought it might be a good kind of confusing.

“You look beautiful, Lix. But for the record? I think you should be yourself in anything you wear. Tail and all.”

The shorter man pulled back to look at Hyunjin with a rosy cheeked smile. “Tail and all.” He echoed like he liked the sound of that.

Hyunjin nodded, aching to reach out and pinch his fluffy little ear. But just as he was about to, he heard a *bang* from downstairs followed by a *flood* of voices.

Voices he knew.

Apparently, reinforcements had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

LOOK AT HYUNJIN! The boldness, the progress 🪶 Next chapter, we're going to work on this whole Minsung debacle...see you on

Sundayyyy!!!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> HAPPY SUNDAY!!! I want to give a quick shout out and huge thank you to everyone who's still reading and supporting this story! I know it's been a different one for me but I had so much fun writing it and it makes me so happy to see all of you having fun reading it Alright, without further ado (sp?)...let's go fix Minsung, shall we?? LET'S GOOOOO!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To be honest, when Hyunjin had suggested bringing in reinforcements earlier, he'd thought it would be at a later date. *Soon,* sure, but not like *right now*.

But sure enough, when he finally checked the group chat as they descended the stairs toward the ruckus of the others, he saw just why everyone had amassed like they'd shone the fucking bat signal.

Lixie [5:15 PM]

CODE RED! CODE RED!!

Lixie [5:16 PM]

MINSUNG NEED OUR HELP

Lixie [5:17 PM]

BRING YOUR BEST IDEAS ASAP

Lixie [5:17 PM]

And snacks. Bring snacks

Hyunjin couldn't hold in his little snort of laughter. “Lix, was the snack thing necessary?”

“I'm offended you would ask that question, Jin Jin.”

The brunette only laughed again as they rounded the corner to find everyone, minus Minsung, in their finest sweats, bags of snacks in hand.

Jeongin’s chips dropped from his hand as Hyunjin and Felix came into view, his eyes going wide. “Um, hi Hyunnie. And Lix, you're…in your homecoming dress?”

He looked so incredibly confused that Hyunjin felt like maybe he should apologize for simply existing and putting that look on his face.

But before he could, Felix was bounding forward, a wide grin in place. “Oh my god, do you like it? I know it's a little different for me but I'm sort of obsessed!” The blond twirled around and around, giving everyone a little show.

Jeongin smiled, eyes still glancing over to Hyunjin with remaining questions. “And you were upstairs showing Hyunjin because…?”

“Oh!” Felix chirped, beaming back at Hyunjin like he was excited. “Because Jin Jin totally saved me earlier today and agreed to go to the dance with me!”

The whole room shared a collective blink before a slow smile started to spread over Chan's lips. He glanced at an equally delighted Changbin before saying. “So like…on a date?”

And Hyunjin couldn't help but deflate a little as he hurriedly shook his head. “No, no, just helping Lix avoid any more awkward invitations.” He looked down at his feet, his smile feeling a little stale. “Like a decoy or something.”

He needed to remember that even if he got a suit, even if he got a matching tie and got to walk into the crepe papered gymnasium with Felix on his arm, it wasn't *real.*

Even if they almost maybe kissed earlier or whatever.

It was an *almost* and a *maybe* so it didn't count. Just like this date.

He was pulled from his thoughts as a slender arm slipped around his.

He looked down to find Felix holding his arm, hugging it to his chest like a teddy bear and smiling up at him. “Yeah, but like, a *cute* decoy.”

Hyunjin felt his entire being ascend to a higher plane as Seungmin scoffed and muttered, “oh my god,” under his breath as Jeongin coughed in a way that sounded suspiciously like ‘*just kiss already*’.

Felix blushed and finally let go of Hyunjin's arm, smoothing out his skirt needlessly before addressing the room. “I'm going to get changed but why don't you all get settled in the living room?”

He took a single step away before pausing, glancing over his shoulder and then lunging. He ripped a bag of marshmallows from Changbin's hands and gleefully fled upstairs.

“Dude seriously? Marshmallows? Lix said to bring snacks.”

“What? It's all we had in the pantry!” Changbin defended as the whole group started to migrate to the living room.

“Oh that's it? You literally *only* had marshmallows?” Jeongin deadpanned.

But Binnie narrowed his eyes. “It was either that, a jar of olives or a variety of protein snacks. And you remember the last time I tried to bring protein snacks to Lix.”

Jeongin nodded in acquiescence. “He said you were trying to push your gym bro agenda on him and that it was a hate crime?”

“Still unclear on the validity of the second part but yeah, Sunshine was not happy.”

They entered the living room, everyone flopping onto chairs and sofas. Hyunjin took the floor, not wanting to invade anyone's space as the seating filled up.

“What’s this?” Jeongin asked, toeing Hyunjin’s bag that was leaking cat toys. He saw the moment it registered with Changbin because he squinted at the bag.

“Are those…?”

He trailed off, eyes flashing over to Hyunjin who was frozen, unsure of what he should or shouldn’t say.

But thankfully, Felix moseyed back into the room at that moment,

cheeks *full* of marshmallows and clutching his donut plush against his chest.

“Toys.” He said nonchalantly as he sat down on the floor next to Hyunjin.

“For what?” Jeongin asked, lifting the wand toy from Hyunjin’s bag like he’d never seen one before and really had no idea how to comprehend such a thing.

But Felix just rolled his eyes. “For playing, *duh.*”

But Hyunjin saw the nervous way Felix gripped his plush. The way he worried his bottom lip between his teeth. He was acting brave and fearless but he was nervous. He was sharing a side of himself that he’d kept hidden for so long and Hyunjin could *see* the wheels turning behind his eyes. *What if they think it’s weird? What if they think* I’m *weird? What if they don’t want to be my friends anymore?*

What if, what if, what if…?

“Oh yeah? Like *this*?” Jeongin said, swinging the wand out with a huge grin, dimples popping fiendishly.

Felix’s spine went straight, his eyes zeroing in like he was hunting before he shook his head, brow lowering into a frown. “Hey! No fair! Plus we’re not-”

“Lixie!” Changbin cried, having crawled over to the bag and armed himself with mice. “Fetch!” He threw one up and over the blond’s head as Chan whirled on the bulky brunette.

“Binnie! That’s offensive!”

“How?”

“He’s not a dog!”

“Yeah, he’s a kitten and kittens don’t like fetch.” Seungmin said before whipping a devilish smirk toward Felix. “They like *tummy rubs*,”

“Dude, no they don't.” Jeongin said, sounding disappointed and exhausted.

But Seungmin was edging forward, a wicked little grin in place as he approached with claw-like hands, aimed toward Felix.

The blond scrambled behind Hyunjin, gripped his shoulders and peaking around him to hiss as Seungmin. *That* got him to pause.

“Ooo,” Changbin said, eyes alight with mischievous intent. “Someone's got angry tail.”

“Can you all calm down?” Felix finally crowed. He stood up from his couch behind Hyunjin and he could *hear* the hands on the cocked hip.

“I'm a hybrid, okay? A *kitten* hybrid. So yeah, I like playing with yarn and laser pointers and toys, okay? And maybe it makes me weird or something but it's who I am! And I don't want to hide it anymore because…b-because…”

“Because life is so much better when you're not hiding.” Hyunjin murmured. He'd meant to say it in his head but the words had slipped out.

There was a beat of silence before Felix rested his hands back on Hyunjin's shoulders, gentler this time, and gave a tiny squeeze. “Yeah. Exactly.”

Jeongin took a look around the room before beaming at the blond with such sweet affection. “Well, for the record, I don't think it's weird at all. I think it's cute.”

Changbin nodded, a matching grin on his face. “Same. Actually, it makes a lot of sense since you're a hybrid.”

Chan was smiling at everyone around the room like a proud father before adding, “Yeah, honestly, I sort of wondered if there was more to the whole hybrid thing besides the ears and the tail.” His smile softened as it shifted to Hyunjin. “I’m just glad you finally feel comfortable enough to express it.”

Felix melted back on to the floor, sitting next to Hyunjin like he wanted to hide behind him but was being brave. He folded his fingers nervously in his lap, ears shyly dipping at the tips. “I…thank you.” He said quietly before clearing his throat and shaking his head.

He took a deep breath, his ears straightening up into perfect little triangles again before tilting his chin back up with purpose. “Okay, enough of that! We need to *focus* on how we’re going to fix this thing with Minsung.”

A chorus of groans rang out around the room, even a little one pulling

out of Hyunjin himself.

“Dude, they’re *hopeless*,” Seungmin groaned, throwing his arm over his eyes like he simply couldn't stand it anymore.

Changbin shoved his shoulder with a frown. “Hey! They’re not *hopeless,* they’re just stupid.”

“I second that,” Jeongin muttered, head thumping back against the couch in defeat.

“Okay, yeah maybe but that’s why they need our help,” Felix urged. He sat up straighter, his eyes *begging* the others to understand. “They’re *soulmates.* We all know it. And I think they do too! They’re just scared.”

Hyunjin couldn’t help but nod in agreement. He didn’t want to overstep but it was *physically* impossible for him to *not* get involved when romance was on the line. “Even I picked up on it the first time I met them. It’s pretty obvious that they’re head over heels. Both of them.”

Chan nodded like what he’d said was sage wisdom. He looked thoughtful, like he was taking it seriously. “Binnie thought they *were* dating when he moved here last year.”

“He fucking wiped the corner of his *lips* at *lunch!*” Changbin crowed. “That’s boyfriend behavior already! So what are they so afraid of? That’s what I don’t get.”

Felix shrugged, eyes falling down to his own little hands as they made shy little biscuits on his donut plush. “Ruining the friendship if the other doesn’t feel the same way?”

Changbin rolled his eyes, a very Minho gesture. “Oh please, but it’s so *obvious.* How can they not see it?”

Felix shrugged again, his eyes flicking over to Hyunjin lighting quick before he looked back down at his plush like he was studying the stitches. “Maybe it’s obvious to us on the outside but to them? It might look totally different.” Another shrug before he looked back up.

“But it’s not our job to understand *why* they can’t figure it out! It’s our job to make it happen!”

Chan nodded, a look of hope starting to creep onto his face. “Agreed. This has gone on long enough.”

Seungmin looked around the room before saying, “I mean yeah, I agree but what are we going to be able to do?”

“I’m so glad you asked,” Felix said, springing up and starting to pace. “So currently, the biggest issue is that Jisungie is avoiding Minho. We need to get them to talk.”

“Okay but how?” Jeongin asked. “Locking them in a room together?”

Felix stopped pacing, eyes open and honest as he gazed back at Jeongin unapologetically.

“Oh my god, you actually want to lock them in a room toge-”

“It’s called *forced proximity* and it works in all the romcoms!” Felix cried, starting to bounce excitedly on his toes.

“Lix,” Chan warned, a tone that made Hyunjin think they’d already had this conversation before. “We’ve talked about this before. Romcoms a-”

“-re not real life, I *know,* but what that doesn’t mean they don’t have good ideas!” Felix finished desperately. He looked around the room, trying to garner some kind of support.

And as much as Hyunjin wanted to follow this lead, he had to admit that it probably toed the line between fun and cute and actually illegal. He gave the blond a sympathetic look.

“Maybe we start with something a little more…subtle, Lixie.” He suggested softly.

The blond groaned and flopped dramatically on the floor beside him, starfishing on the carpet. “Then what else are we supposed to do?”

The room was quiet for a moment before a little idea sparked in Hyunjin’s brain.

“Well,” he started carefully, the idea still forming. “Monday, after school, Minho and I are meeting in the library to go over the calculus midterm study guide. And *normally* he tutors me on *Thursdays*-”

“-And Jisung would know that.” Chan said, the lightbulb going on for him too. “Meaning, if someone like, oh I don’t know, Lixie, asked

Jisung to come to the library for some totally real and valid reason on Monday after school-"

"-We can *trap him*." Felix said, stars in his eyes.

Jeongin laughed nervously. "Okay, can we maybe not say it like that?"

"It's still forced whatever you called it-"

"Proximity." Hyunjin and Felix said in sync.

"Sure, forced proximity or whatever." Chan said. "It's just a little less likely to send us to jail."

Felix waved it off like prison was the least of his worries and god, how pathetic was it that it sort of made Hyunjin swoon a little?

"But what if Jisung tries to run?" Seungmin asked. "Every time they've even come *close* to crossing paths, he bolts like a scared deer."

"I can stand watch outside the library." Changbin offered easily.

"And I have the last class of the day with him," Jeongin added, "So I can aid in the hand off."

Felix nodded, the pieces all starting to fit together. "Okay so Jin Jin will meet with Minho in the library, easy. Jeongin will make sure Jisung sticks around long enough for me to get over there and get him to the library."

"But how are you going to do that?" Seungmin asked, eyebrows raised with a challenge. "What could the two of *you* possibly need in a *library?* I've never even *seen* Jisung in the library before. I'm not even convinced he can *read.*"

"Down there, puppy," Chan said, biting back a smile. "But he does make a good point, Lix. How are you going to get Jisung to the library?"

The blond rolled his eyes like the answer was painfully obvious. "Easy. I'll just tell them there's free pizza."

The whole room thought it over for a mere second before deciding that indeed would motivate Jisung to go almost anywhere.

"God forbid someone in a windowless van ever offers him candy,"

Jeongin muttered under his breath before straightening up. “Okay, so we have a plan. But what if it doesn’t work?”

“It has to.” Felix said with a serious set to his lips.

*****

The rest of the weekend was spent in their new group chat (Minsung Makeout Mission or M squared) ironing out details. Changbin would stand watch outside the library in case Jisung bolted and Chan would wait with him. Seungmin offered to join the Jisung chase squad but did warn them that he wasn’t very fast and didn’t really see himself being able to catch him if it came down to that.

But in the midst of all the planning, Hyunjin had these little texts coming in on the side. The ones from Felix. He sent a picture of his homecoming dress on the hanger so Hyunjin would have something to compare tie colors with. He sent Hyunjin a few different shoe options that he couldn’t decide between. He asked if he’d maybe want to get dinner beforehand. And every little text, every little question, every shy little ask made Hyunjin’s heart *thunder* in his chest.

It was starting to feel so *real.* And he knew he should reel it in or maybe ask some clarifying questions about intentions or something but oh *god,* it was so nice to daydream about Felix walking down the stairs in that dress. Hair in curls and piled on top of his head, make up done and pretty pink nails sliding down the bannister as he descended like a fucking angel from the heavens.

God, he needed to get a suit. He needed to *earn* that spot next to Felix, even if it was fake.

By the time Monday rolled around, they’d gone over the plan so many times it damn near felt fool proof.

As per the new usual, Minho and Jisung were largely absent from lunch, faking some kind of meeting with a teacher or school activity that kept them away from the table. Hyunjin had to wonder if they were eating in bathroom stalls like he used to.

The day dragged by, an odd little tension bunching up the muscles in Hyunjin’s back. He felt restless. He was eager to get those two in the

same room. He was anxious to have them talk and work this out and he *needed* love to win.

He needed some kind of proof as he glanced for the thousandth time at Felix, hunched over his biology notes and studying fervently. He'd worn little pink bows at the base of his ears today and it was *ending* Hyunjin. Truly, there was no way he'd recover from this.

When the bell rang, signalling the end of class, he felt like he was going to throw up. Honestly, he had the easiest job: go to the library to meet with Minho, just like planned. But he was anxious to see if this actually worked. Just because he *wanted* it to, didn't mean it *would.* And if it didn't? He wasn't sure what else they could do.

"Show time," Felix said with determination burning in his eyes. He threw his backpack on, and turned to salute Hyunjin. "I'll see you out there," He said solemnly before racing for the door to catch Jisung.

Hyunjin wished he had asked for a hug or something to ground him but it was too late now. He pulled his own backpack on, heart hammering in his chest like *he* was going to be confessing or something.

He made his way to the library, the quiet of the room feeling eerie instead of soothing like it normally did.

He found Minho sitting at the usual table, back bent over his own work. The taller boy took a deep, steadying breath and approached.

"Hey," He said softly, his voice still managing to crack even though it was at 2 percent volume. Thankfully, the fact that he was *normally* a nervous mess meant it didn't set off any alarm bells.

Minho merely glanced up and nodded at him in greeting, immediately shoving his own work to the side and making little grabby hands.

"Let me see what we're working with," He said.

Hyunjin dug the study guide out of his calculus folder, trying *really* hard not to openly scowl at it. He slid it over and watched Minho give it a once over, his own eyes shooting toward the library doors over and over again, awaiting Felix and Jisung's arrival.

"Yeah, it's pretty much what I expected," Minho finally said, setting the packet back on the table and pulling out a pen. "I'm going to circle the things I think you might need extra study on but some of it I really

do think you've got down. Don't waste your time studying stuff you already know."

Hyunjin nodded like he agreed even though he full heartedly believed he needed divine intervention to pass this test by anything more than the skin of his teeth.

"So where do you want to start? Because I think-"

The door to the library slammed open, a *frantic* Jisung and Felix pouring in like they were about to uncover elusive treasure.

"No seriously! Yee-Jin said something about pizza in the library? It's like, some famous author's birthday or something, I dunno," Felix said with a completely believable off handed tone that had Hyunjin a little stunned. He didn't know if he should be impressed by his acting or nervous for the ease in which he lied to his friend's face.

"Is the author here?" Jisung asked, whipping from side to side like he would be able to recognize an author if he saw one.

Felix shrugged. "No, he's like super dead or somethin-oh my god! Jin Jin! Hi!"

It was with the worst segue of the century that Jisung turned around, his eyes finally landing on Hyunjin and Minho's table before his eyes went wide, his face blanching like he'd seen a ghost.

"I-I, I just remembered, I need-"

But Felix had Jisung's hand in a vice grip, dragging the shaking brunette forward with a feral smile in place. "Come on Jisungie, let's just say hi!"

"Quietly," Hyunjin said nervously, offering the scowling librarian a sickly little smile.

Felix blushed a little and ducked his head as they drew near. "Sorry Jin Jin," he whispered before his eyes widened comically. "Oh! Minnie! I didn't see you there!"

Minho looked thoroughly unimpressed. Hyunjin could practically *see* him reading the entire ruse off of Felix's too wide smile. He knew *exactly* what was happening as Felix *dragged* Jisung along with him.

"Hey Jiji," He said softly, ducking his eyes down and trying to catch

Jisung's which were nailed to the floor.

"Hey," He whispered quickly before trying and failing to tug his arm free of Felix's fingers. "Listen, I really do need to go. I have to run to the Spanish room. I have a question for the teacher-"

"Your Spanish midterm was last week." Minho said effortlessly. He was holding his pen tightly, knuckles white.

Jisung froze, his nervous energy not evaporating but turning inward. He looked like he was going to be sick as his eyes finally looked at Minho.

Minho kept his eyes on the table.

"O-oh yeah," Jisung said, forcing a terribly fake laugh. "I just, uh, I meant that I forgot something and-"

"Jiji-"

"-I need to go look for it before-"

"Jiji, please. Just talk to me-"

"S-sorry, I'm just so busy and I don't really have the time and maybe-"

"You won't even *look* at me!" Minho hissed, his eyes finally ripping off the top of the table and nailing themselves to Jisung. His chest was heaving silently, his eyes looking dewy. He looked fucking *heartbroken.*

"*You* kissed *me.*" Minho's voice was soft and lethal. "And now you won't even *look* at me."

Jisung's bottom lip was starting to wobble. He was about to crash. Hyunjin could see it. He could *feel* it. Even Felix's one track mind had shifted as his feral glee at forcing a reunion shifted to soft sympathy. He reached out to place a hand on Jisung's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," He whispered to the threadbare carpet.

Minho sighed, sounding so beyond exasperated. "Don't be *sorry,* just fucking talk to me. You're-" he broke off, clenching his lips together brutally like he was steeling himself away. He leaned forward, *urging* Jisung to listen to him. To *hear* him.

"We're best friends, Jiji. We've always been able to talk about

anything."

But Jisung was shaking his head, tears falling from his eyes as he took a step back. "I can't Minnie. I just, I *can't* talk about this."

He took another step back before shaking his head, biting back a sob and running out of the library.

They heard the shouts of Chan, Seungmin and Changbin in the hall and a small stampede of feet but Minho was already deflating into himself.

"Let me guess: their job is to catch him and bring him back."

"Jisung chase squad, yeah." Felix said quietly.

Minho offered a sad little smile as he shook his head. "Why you'd ever put Binnie on a *chase squad* is beyond me; that man has the aerodynamics of a *building."*

"His zone 2 is improving," Hyunjin whispered.

Minho snorted but otherwise ignored it.

"Regardless, they won't catch him. Nobody is faster than a scared Jiji. Trust me. I know."

And if anyone would, it would be Minho.

"I'm sorry Minnie," Felix said softly, a frown pulling his lips down. "We just wanted to help."

"I know and I appreciate it." Minho said, leaning back in his chair with a sigh.

They stood in silence for a few long seconds before Minho sighed again, leaning forward and bracing his forearms on the table. "Okay, back to studying." He said, tapping his finger on the study guide in between him and Hyunjin.

"A-are you sure?" Hyunjin asked.

"Do you want to fail your midterm?"

"No."

"Then yes, I'm sure. Page 92."

Hyunjin nodded, peeling his book open obediently and looking to Felix with a little shrug. It was one thing to *casually* place Minho and Jisung in the same room. But it was another thing entirely to try to corner Minho into doing *anything.* That would be akin to cornering a badger.

Felix sighed, his little fists tightening around the straps of his backpack as he slowly took a step back. “I guess I’ll leave you guys to it then.” He offered a soft little wave before leaving, his tail nearly tucked between his legs as he left.

Minho kept his head low, eyes on the pages of predictable math problems as he explained the correct order of operations to solve each one. Hyunjin had to wonder if it was almost soothing to him right now. To be faced with a problem that had an obvious answer. Not the entire spectrum of gray that currently defined the entire Jisung situation.

He listened to the drone of Minho’s voice, methodically explaining equations and variables before he just couldn’t hold it in anymore. He didn’t want to overstep but this *had* to work. If Minsung couldn’t make it work then what hope did *Hyunjin* have?

“Do you miss him?”

Minho froze, his finger stilling on the page. “That’s a stupid question. Of course I do.”

Hyunjin nodded, spinning his pencil slowly between his fingers. “You know he likes you too, right?”

Minho snorted. “Doesn’t really feel like it.”

“But he *kissed you*!” Hyunjin cried, catching himself just in time and *not* screaming it in the middle of the library.

The brunette’s eyes flashed, a sliver of something wounded inside. “Yeah and now he’s avoiding me like the plague. What am I supposed to do about that, huh? How am I supposed to fix it? Because I’ve *tried* calling, I’ve *tried* texting. I’ve shown up at his front door, I’ve thrown rocks at his window, Hyunjin. I fucking *called his mom.* And nothing. So what do I do, Hyunjin? Huh? How am I supposed to make sense of the fact that Jisung *kissed me* and now doesn’t even want to *talk* to me? That looks a lot like regret to me.”

He blinked angry tears away, hurriedly dragging his wrist over his

eyes in an attempt to hide the evidence.

And yeah, Hyunjin could understand perfectly where Minho was coming from. He couldn't say he wouldn't feel the exact same way if he was in his shoes. But he wasn't. He was the objective third party and it was his job to point out the very obvious other theory.

"Or he's just scared." Hyunjin muttered softly, like he was approaching a scared animal. "Jisung took a big leap, right? So maybe he's afraid of what you're going to say. Maybe…every time you start talking, he imagines the worst and runs for it before you can break his heart."

Minho blinked at him, the idea settling somewhere in his brain for him to inspect.

"I mean, think of it this way," Hyunjin pushed. "If *you* had kissed Jisung out of nowhere and he hadn't *immediately* kissed you back…I mean, wouldn't it make sense for some doubt to set in maybe?"

Minho frowned down at the table. He could *see* the way he was reconciling these words as potential truths and simultaneously grappling with what it could mean. Because it could mean that Jisung did, in fact, like him back.

"So…if it was you…what would Jisung need to do to get you to stop and listen to him?"

Minho stared off into the middle distance, his thoughts racing behind his eyes before they landed on Hyunjin. "He'd need to open with something obvious. Something that made it obvious at the start that he wasn't going to break my heart."

Hyunjin felt this weird little surge of pride. Somehow he - a loveless loser - had perhaps successfully coached Minho through a problem of his own. It wouldn't help him pass any midterms but it *could* potentially prevent him from dying alone with a hoard of cats.

He watched as Minho slowly closed his book and glanced up at him. "Do you mind if we call it a day? I have some thinking to do."

Hyunjin nodded. He would happily fail his midterm in the name of love.

They quietly gathered their things, books slid into backpacks and backpacks onto shoulders.

“Hey,” Minho said, just as Hyunjin turned to leave. “Thanks. For talking and…” He trailed off before just smirking, “I dunno, for believing he likes me too, I guess.”

Hyunjin smiled back. “Anytime.”

*****

The remainder of Hyunjin's evening was spent trying to talk Felix off the proverbial cliff. He was damn near distraught over the failed plan and was full swing trying to convince Chan that kidnapping would be ‘less illegal in the name of love’.

By the time the replies stopped coming in, everyone most likely falling asleep one by one, no plan had been made.

And when Hyunjin found Felix by their lockers the next morning, the blond looked like he'd hardly slept a wink. His hair was flatter than usual, his curls a little less bouncy and his ears had the slightest droop to them. His tail was wrapped around him closely, like it wanted to give him a hug.

And as Hyunjin approached, Felix didn't even try to hide it.

“Jin Jin, this is driving me insane,” he groaned and let his forehead hit the locker door in utter defeat. “They're *perfect* for each other.” He explained to the metal. “Why can't they *see* that?!”

Hyunjin offered a sympathetic smile that the blond couldn't see since he was currently communing with the locker door.

“They're too close to it. They can't see things objectively.”

Felix rolled his head to the side, looking so forlorn as he said, “Oh like the objective *fact* that they're *soulmates?”*

Hyunjin chuckled and slowly started to twist the lock as Felix finally backed away, flopping like a dead fish onto his back. He leaned heavily against the locker next to theirs with a long, tired sigh.

“It just hurts to watch,” he muttered, fingers picking apart the micro tangles in his tail fur.

“I know, Lixie.” Hyunjin said because really, what else could he say? “If it makes you feel any better, I tried to talk to Minho yesterday after everyone left?”

The blond perked up, a tentative hope on his face. “Yeah?”

He nodded, wedging his helmet into his locker and piling books in after. Every single day, he swore that damn helmet wasn’t going to fit and every damn day it just *barely* did.

“Yeah. I just tried to have him look at it from Jisung’s point of view. I asked him if he was in his shoes, what Jisung would need to do to get him to listen.” He shrugged. “I don’t know if it helped but he said he needed to do some thinking so…”

He trailed off with another shrug before closing his locker.

Felix had his lips pulled to the side, deep in thought before he shrugged in return. “I guess we’ll just have to see.” He said before his eyes narrowed and he added, “But if Jisung is still breaking land speed records to avoid Minho by the end of the week, I don’t care *what* Channie says, I’m buying handcuffs.”

Hyunjin chuckled even though he was about 80% sure he wasn’t kidding at all.

He worked his way through his morning classes, pleasantly delighted that even with a shortened tutoring session yesterday, he was somewhat able to understand what his calculus teacher was droning on about in their lesson.

A silly part of him wanted to run to lunch and giddily tell Minho how he’d *not* been helpless for once in class.

But when they got to the table, the cafeteria bustling around them, Minho wasn’t at the table.

Jisung however, was hunched over a slice of pizza, eating quickly like he was being timed. Jeongin was sitting next to him, trying to pull him into conversation but all of Jisung’s answers were one syllable or merely a nod.

Hyunjin swore he almost *heard* Felix’s heart breaking next to him. It was hard to see someone as joyful as Jisung go quiet. And not only that, it was *weird.*

Hyunjin had only known him for a couple of months but even he'd become so used to the constant blur of motion that was Jisung. But now, he haunted the table like a silent spectator. Like he didn't want to be seen or heard. Like he didn't even want to *be* there. Like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And that other shoe was Minho. Because the second he appeared, heading toward the table with long, sure strides, Hyunjin saw the way Jisung's eyes grew wide and nervous. The way he hurriedly set down his half finished pizza and frantically wiped the grease from his hands.

Then came the customary, paper thin excuse.

"I, uh, I got to go. Left something in my locker." He said to Jeongin, interrupting him mid story about some class he was taking.

Jeongin's eyes immediately found Minho approaching, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

Next was the awkward exchange that had become the new normal.

"Jiji-"

"-sorry, I got to run."

"Jiji, wait-"

But Jisung was already hoisting his backpack onto his shoulder, his hand shaking as he lifted his tray to make his escape.

"Jisungie, *please,"* Felix whined, eyes starting to shine with a desperation that was echoed on everyone's face.

Chan looked worried as Jisung merely shook his head. So subtle, so soft but so sad.

Changbin was looking down at the table, like he couldn't stand the sight of another retreat.

Seungmin had a frown pulling the corners of his lips down, nearing a pout as Jisung fumbled and stumbled away from the table to dump his tray.

And poor Jeongin looked like he wanted to race after him, to *beg* him to stay with his sad puppy dog eyes.

But he didn't need to because just as Jisung reached the doors to the cafeteria, Hyunjin heard a "Goddammit," before the fucking table shook.

He tore his eyes off the shaking brunette trying to escape to find Minho standing on top of their table, eyes on *fire*.

"Han *fucking* Jisung!"

The entire cafeteria stuttered into silence. Heads whipped to their table, gawking at the bold boy who was standing atop a fucking table with fists clenched and a determined look on his face.

Jisung swung around, surprise painted on his face. He looked borderline terrified and for a split second, Hyunjin was convinced he was going to make a run for it.

But Minho must have seen it too because he shook his head ever so slightly and yelled, "Go to homecoming with me."

Gasps rung out around the room. Whispers started almost instantly, people ducking behind their hands with wide eyes and disbelief.

Jisung's mouth fell open, eyes blinking in rapid succession. He looked like he needed to reboot.

Minho stood, fearless, on top of the table with an unwavering gaze as Felix gripped Hyunjin's thigh under the table.

Even Hyunjin was so desperately invested in these next few minutes that he didn't even think twice when he ripped Felix's claws from his leg so he could grip his hand back.

Jisung was gripping his backpack strap tightly, looking like he was going to throw up.

"Like…as friends?" He asked, voice coming out croaky from disuse.

Minho's sigh filled the entire fucking room. "No, you *dumb ass!* As my *date!* I'm going to buy a fucking suit and so are you. And I'm going to text you I'm leaving my house and I'm going to drive around the fucking block a few times so I can pick you up like a *fucking* gentleman."

Jisung's shoulders dropped. Like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He started floating forward as Minho's tirade continued.

“I’m going to buy you one of those dumb flowers you pin to your lapel and I’m going to have to pin it on you because lord knows you won’t be able to without fucking stabbing yourself in the chest. And then I’m going to take you that stupid fucking dance with all the dumb fucking decorations and the shitty punch that someone is going to spike.”

Jisung’s eyes were *shining.* A mix of stars and hope and soft disbelief as he wobbled closer to the pulpit, his backpack sliding down his shoulders like it was melting off of him.

“We’re going to slow dance and take those stupid, cheesy pictures that I hate and we’re going to eat whatever terrible food they have and then, when it’s all done, I’m going to drive you home. And I’m going to walk you to the door like a goddamn gentleman and I’m going to tell you how fucking *incredible* you look because you *always* look incredible and god *dammit* Jisung, I’m going to kiss you goodnight!”

A barking little laugh came out of Jisung as he looked up at Minho like a god. He was at the edge of the table, tears trickling out of his eyes as he gazed upon his friend with such love and adoration and *relief.*

Minho took a deep breath, his volume finally faltering to something a little less loud. “And I won’t run away after. I won’t avoid you. Because I *want* to kiss you. I have *always* wanted to kiss you.”

Jisung’s face broke into the biggest grin, even as his tears continued to fall.

“So,” Minho said, his shoulders falling and his hands opening up beside him like he was willing to let some higher power take him away. Like he would offer his very soul for a simple yes. “Will you go to homecoming with me, Jiji?”

Felix’s hand tightened impossibly inside Hyunjin’s.

Jisung nodded fervently as he finally, *finally* stumbled up onto the table, stepping squarely in Changbin’s mashed potatoes as he grabbed the front of Minho’s shirt and hauled him in for a kiss.

The cafeteria *exploded.*

Cheers, applause, wolf whistles, all of it. And Hyunjin couldn’t help it. He sprang up, pulling Felix with him as he cried out in victory.

Love had won. It had *actually* won!

Felix was *crying,* jumping up and down excitedly while Jeongin yelled "Finally!" from the other side of the table.

Chan was clapping like his first born had just sang their first solo and brought the fucking house down.

And Changbin, well he was currently mourning the loss of his lunch but Hyunjin knew that somewhere, deep down, he was happy for them.

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Dear Diary,

For the last few weeks, all the homecoming posters have been saying that 'Love is in the Air' but today was the first time where it actually felt like it was.

MINSUNG PREVAILS!!!

I never really had my doubts because I've watched a LOT of romance movies and read a lot of romance books and stuff so I KNEW they would figure it out because love always wins but like…I have to admit. Even I was starting to get a little worried there.

But all it took was a highly detailed confession from Minho and a step by step game plan for their first date, broadcast to the entire student body for Jisung to believe that he hadn't hated his surprise kiss!

I'm not sure if my talk with Minho yesterday helped but…I kind of hope it did. Maybe that's kind of selfish of me to say though, I dunno. I just…I like thinking I helped. Because I guess like…that's what friends do, right? So that would be cool if I'd helped.

But it's kind of got me thinking…

I told Minho that he needed to look at it from a different perspective. And I kept telling Lix that it was different to them because they were too close to it. So like, what about me?

Is there something I'M too close to see? Like…and look, I know it's crazy

but like…Chan's made some comments before. About me and Felix. And so has Binnie. And I always just thought they were being nice or maybe just humoring me or maybe like just a little insane but…what if they're not?

What if…

I mean, Felix holds my hands sometimes. And we hug. And I'm the only one he lets touch his ears and stuff outside his family. He cuddles. He purred around me.

I just…what if maybe that all means something? Like…something big? Something maybe a little crazy?

Something maybe sort of kind of along the lines of maybe almost like he maybe…likes me???

God, I know that sounds crazy but I can't stop thinking about it. If Minsung - the power couple of the century - can be blind to it for years then like, what's to say I wouldn't be, right?

Or I'm actually fully delusional finally.

But either way, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to keep an open mind…

Chapter End Notes

MINSUNG PREVAILS!!! AND??? Hyunjin is starting to see things from a different perspective...and that will only be validated even more next chapter I'll see you on Thursday!!!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

> I'M BAAACCCKKKK!!!! And it's time to get Hyunnie ready for homecoming! Feat. a feral Jeongin and a wonderfully unhelpful Seungmin Alright, LET'S GOOOOO!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hyunjin needed help and he figured the best time to ask would be during a run. Mainly because he wasn't sure how much teasing he could endure around the whole homecoming sham and how pathetically *into* it he was. And if he asked during a run, Changbin would be too busy fighting for his life to say much. And Chan was less inclined to poke too much fun on account of his soft heart.

But when Chan and Binnie turned the corner, jogging up the house with wide smiles and waved to his mom who was giddily waving back and *yelling* good morning at them, Hyunjin figured he better just snag onto the pack before his mom strong-armed one of them inside.

But then he was busy trying to get Changbin to remember to slow down, dragging the pace to damn near a crawl so the poor guy could catch his breath.

“He’s been gasping for air since the third minute. He started to turn purple around the ten minute mark.”

“T-the next stage is *death-”* Changbin gasped, clutching at his heart like he was personally counting the beats per minute. “I’m c-certain of it.”

“Then stop talking and breathe,” Hyunjin said with a worried yet fond smile. He really admired how dedicated Changbin was to his weekly runs, even if he looked like he was passing away each and every time.

“B-but…it’s supposed to…to be…conversation pace…” Changbin wheezed.

Hyunjin nodded as their little pack rounded the corner. “Don’t worry, we’ll work up to it.”

Chan chuckled easily as they staggered around Binnie to keep the pace where it needed to be for their friend to survive.

They took another right, making a loose circle on some made up route that Chan was leading when Hyunin finally pulled up all of his courage to try to broach the subject.

“So uh, are you two going to homecoming?”

Chan nodded. “Yeah, but mainly because I’m on the planning committee. Student class president duties, ya know?”

Hyunjin nodded like he did indeed know even though he probably didn’t. It would shock no one to find that he’d never once been a part of a committee but he could *imagine* what all it might entail.

“Binnie?” He asked.

“I mean…*sure*…but not like you….*Casanova,*” Changbin gasped, attempting a little laugh that sounded feeble at best.

Hyunjin felt his face heating up. “It’s not like that,” He said for what felt like the thousandth time. Hell, he had to keep reminding *himself* that Felix was using him as a scapegoat.

Chan snorted, guiding them around another corner and checking both ways before waving them to the other side of the street. “Well Lixie is *very* excited for your fake date.”

“H-he is?” Hyunjin said, *hungry* for more information.

Because he knew that Felix was excited by the dozens of texts he got about it every day, even in class sometimes. But he sort of assumed the blond was excited in a way that any sparkle obsessed kitten would be about make up and pretty dresses.

Felix was the king of cute and a high school dance was about as close as they could get to attending a ball.

Chan nodded, eyes glancing at Hyunjin like he wanted to gauge his reaction. “Totally. Ever since Jisung and Minho got their shit together, he’s been dragging Jisung to the mall almost every night to shop for accessories.”

Hyunjin felt a little smile tug at his lips. He could picture it so clearly; the two of them wreaking havoc on some poor, unsuspecting store as they rifled through anything and everything shiny, in search for the *perfect* earrings or necklace.

“That’s uh…that’s really sweet, actually.” Hyunjin said, unable to keep the dopey grin from spreading onto his face. It was getting so much harder to fight.

They rounded another corner, completing their loose circle and making their way back to Hyunjin’s house. The idea was that he’d peel off and go home while Chan and Changbin used the remaining distance to their house as a nice, long cool down walk.

But Hyunjin still needed help. Especially after hearing how much effort Felix was putting in? He needed to make sure he showed up with his A game.

So as his house came into view, he took a deep breath and asked, “Would you guys want to come inside for some water or something? My uh…my mom would love to meet you.”

“*God please-”* Binnie gasped, looking positively desperate as his heavy steps slowed even more. His head was tilted back toward the sky like he was hoping an act of divine intervention would end his suffering.

“As long as she’s okay with three sweaty teenagers in her house unannounced.” Chan answered with a giggle that held real concern. Like he actually really didn’t want to inconvenience her or stink up the place.

God she was going to love him.

“Trust me, she won’t mind at all.” Hyunjin said with certainty.

They slowed to a walk, Changbin huffing and puffing and needing a minute to brace himself on his knees as he narrowly avoided death, yet again.

“Proud of you, Bin,” Chan said, clapping him on the back.

He gave a weak thumbs up but didn’t raise his head.

Eventually, he was able to right himself and his bright smile looked ten times whiter against the flushed red of his cheeks. “Alright, I’m good. I’m alive. Good run, guys!”

Hyunjin couldn’t help but chuckle, shaking his head fondly.

“What? You laughing at me, Hyunnie?” Changbin crowed, his smile growing even wider as he threw a bulky arm over the taller man’s

shoulders.

Hyunjin got the door unlocked but only laughed again. “No, I just…I appreciate your attitude. That’s all.”

“You mean the stubbornness?” Chan joked, toeing his shoes off at the door.

“I’m a hopeless optimist! That’s what they call it!”

Hyunjin slunk out from under the heavy arm on his shoulders to slide his shoes off before deciding to be bold and looking up at Changbin with a soft smile. “I wouldn’t call it hopeless.”

“Awww, don’t get sweet on me, Hyunnie! Lixie will get jealous,”

“Shut up,” Hyunjin giggled, straightening up and feeling his smile grow even bigger. Maybe it was silly but he felt like he was getting better at this whole ‘having friends’ thing. He was less nervous. He was finding it easier to smile and laugh and take a joke.

And god, it felt so fucking nice.

“Jinnie, do you-oh!” His mom skidded to a stop as she rounded the corner, a rag in one hand and apron tied tight around her waist. “Oh! I didn’t realize we had guests!”

“I hope that’s okay,” Chan said with a soft smile as he took a step forward, arm extended. “Hi, I’m Bang Chan.”

“Oh Chan, yes! Oh it’s so nice to meet you!” Seon-mi shook his hand *fervently,* her smile starting to get that scary little edge to it that made Hyunjin a little worried.

“And you must be Changbin!” She said excitedly, turning toward the pink cheeked man who was still subtly trying to catch his breath.

He smiled wide and held a hand out in return, delighting his mother with his manners.

“Yes ma’am. Seo Changbin. Nice to finally meet you.”

Her smile was starting to verge on disturbing as she shook his hand. “Why don’t you boys stay for breakfast? I was just about to ask Jinnie if he wanted one egg or two with his kimchi rice.”

“Oh my god, I’m so hungry,” Changbin whined immediately, following

Hyunjin's mom to the kitchen like a little duckling.

Chan rolled his eyes, rubbing the back of his neck and glancing at Hyunjin. "Is this okay? That we stay for breakfast?"

"Yeah." Hyunjin said. Because honestly, he *still* needed to ask for their help finding a suit for homecoming and sooner or later, they'd need to meet his parents anyways. He supposed he could just knock both out today.

"Jun-Ho, look! Hyunnie's friends are joining us for breakfast!" Seon-min gestured grandly to them as they filed into the kitchen like they were royalty and not sweaty teenagers.

Chan grinned, dimples popping as he boldly approached Hyunjin's father to shake his hand, Changbin right behind him.

Hyunjin had to be honest, he was kind of proud to bring these two home and introduce them as his friends. Between one being the class president and the other one essentially being the world's biggest teddy bear, they were like crack to parents.

"Alright boys, how many eggs?" Seon-min asked from her post at the stove, egg poised and ready.

"Two for me please," Chan answered while Changbin looked down a little self consciously before asking quietly, "Is four too many?"

Seon-min shook her head no even as Chan punching him in the arm with an admonishing, 'dude, *really*?'

"Of course not! You're young, growing boys and we have plenty to spare. Plus, you need the protein if you're going to keep up with those muscles! Do you two play any sports?"

They both nodded.

"Yeah, I do track and field and swim but also used to play on a soccer team when I was younger. Now I just play for fun with Seungmin and Binnie."

"Hyunnie always wanted to play soccer when he was little," Jun-Ho said, taking a careful sip of his coffee. "But with all the moving we did, it never ended up happening," He glanced at Hyunjin with apologetic eyes like he truly was sorry he hadn't been able to make that happen.

“Aw, why didn’t you say something?” Chan crowed, clapping a hand down on Hyunjin’s shoulder. “You’re always welcome to come play with us. Seungmin is pretty good but Jisung almost broke an ankle last time so we accept all skill levels.”

Hyunjin chuckled, clearly able to picture the way Jisung probably ran *away* from the ball.

“What about you, Changbin? Any sports?”

“Just cheer,” He said after a sip of water.

Hyunjin saw his mom’s spine straighten. The way her entire being perked up and he just *knew* what her next question was.

“Oh! So you know Lixie?”

She sounded so goddamn hopeful, like merely saying the blond’s name would conjure him into the kitchen, all shy eyed and giggly.

Oh and Changbin just *beamed* back like she’d said his favorite word. “Know him? I’m the only one that’s allowed to catch our sunshine on the squad.”

His mom looked genuinely impressed as she carefully started pulling the fried eggs from the pan and laying them on top of steaming bowls of kimchi rice. “That’s a very important job,” she said solemnly.

“And I take it very seriously.” Changbin assured her without missing a beat.

And Hyunjin really appreciated how friendly and amiable Changbin was with his mom until he shifted a wicked little smile his way and opened his big, fat mouth again.

“I mean, I’m sure Hyunjin wouldn’t be very happy with me if I dropped his homecoming date at the big game on Friday.”

His dad choked on his coffee, coughing out a ragged gasp when he finally cleared his airway. He blinked, wide eyed, at Hyunjin like he simply couldn’t process the words he’d just heard.

And like yeah, he got it. Because how on *earth* had his loser of a son secured a date with the hottest guy in school? Even a *fake* one!

“N-no, no, it’s not-”

“Hwang Hyunjin,”

Every single man in the room froze, some instinctual part of their brain responding to the ancient tone of a woman’s rage. Quiet, concealed…but dangerous. Like a dagger hidden up a sleeve, ready to strike at a moment’s notice.

“Mom, it’s not-*ow, hey!”*

How his mom appeared across the kitchen so fast, he could not figure out but driven by her anger, she apparently *materialized* next to him, whipping him in the arm with her rag with a satisfying snap.

“You’re taking Lixie to *homecoming* and you didn’t think to *tell me*?”

“Oh shit,” Changbin muttered, trying to hide behind his coffee mug. Even Chan looked like he wasn’t sure if he needed to step in, watching it all unfold with bated breath.

“No! I mean *yes,* I am but-”

“But what? Thought you could just sneak your first date past me?”

“Not at all! Mom, just wait! Let me explain!”

“Yes, Jinnie. Please.” Seon-Min said, hands on her hips with a sassy defiance that made her look years younger and mildly terrifying. “Explain to me how you *forgot* to tell me that you’re taking my sweet, perfect Lixie to homecoming.”

“Okay, so first off, *I’m* your son,” He quipped, unable to disagree but also unable to *not* say something. “But it’s good to see where your allegiances lie. And *secondly,* like I was trying to say before you *immediately* resorted to violence, it’s not a *real* date.”

Her hand fell off her cocked hip, hanging loosely by her side. Her one raised brow became two and her face softened into confusion. “Not a *real* date?”

Hyunjin nodded, slouching back into his chair. Partially because seemingly the threat of attack had lessened but also because it was a little demoralizing to forcibly rip himself from the fantasy of this date by explaining in clear detail that it was a sham.

“Lix kept getting bugged by people asking him out. And he sort of just asked if I could go with him. Like a decoy or something so people

would stop asking."

For the first time, Hyunjin wondered if perhaps he should have said no to this plan. Not because he didn't want to but precisely because he wanted it too much.

It was a quiet torture, to pretend to have the one thing he so desperately wanted.

"Oh," His mom said, her voice a little too flat to be convincing.

His father reached across the table and patted his hands that were wrapped around his too hot mug. "That was very nice of you, Jin."

Chan nodded in sync with his father, only adding to his fatherly aura.

"That doesn't mean you can't still knock his socks off!" Changbin stated boldly, a waggle to his eyebrow that Hyunjin decided was his chance.

"Actually," He finally said, setting his mug down and letting his finger trace the rim over and over again. "I was wondering if you guys could maybe help me figure out what to wear? To homecoming? I just…I know Lix is going to look great." He said it a little too softly but it was impossible not to when he remembered the soft ruffles of his dress and his wild curls and his bare feet.

"And I don't want to show up looking like a bum or something." He admitted.

The last time he'd worn a suit had been to a recital in middle school and he would bet good money that it didn't fit anymore.

Chan smiled apologetically and scratched the back of his neck bashfully. "Aw man, I would love to. But to be honest? I'm just wearing my dad's old suit so I'm probably not the right guy for this job."

Changbin nodded. "Yeah and Felix never likes the things I pick out when we go shopping. Last time he came over, he begged my mom to start picking my outfits for me again."

Seon-min snorted from the kitchen as she precariously balanced all five bowls of rice and brought them to the table.

"But you know who would be a good person to help with this?"

Changbin said with an excited snap. “Jeonginnie! He and Felix go shopping together all the time!”

“Oh, and Jeongin almost always gets Felix some kind of clothing or accessory item for his birthday or Christmas and Lixie always loves it!” Chan confirmed.

But that pesky anxiety was starting to crawl up his sternum. “I don’t know guys,” He said, fiddling a grain of rice between his chopsticks. “I don’t want to bother him.”

But Chan ducked his head down enough to find Hyunjin’s eyes and offered a smile. “You won’t be. He was just telling me that he wanted to find a way to thank you for helping him with art history. He might actually be thankful for the opportunity to pay you back.”

“He doesn’t need to do that,” Hyunjin said immediately.

“Well yeah, I know that. But just humor him. It would make him feel good.”

At Hyunjin’s hesitation, Changbin added, “It never hurts to text. If he doesn’t want to or is busy, he’ll just say no. No harm, no foul.”

It was beyond embarrassing but Hyunjin couldn't contain the way his eyes flicked to his mom like he was asking for help. He felt like such a little kid but god, he was still so out of his depth with this stuff. And not just the friend thing. That would have been enough to make him basically non-functioning. But add in the stress of a fake date with the man of your dreams and yeah, it pretty much quadrupled the stress level.

His mom gave him the tiniest nod before looking down at her rice, totally non-chalant. “I could drive you two.” She offered casually. “I need to do a little shopping of my own.”

Hyunjin felt his chest loosen a little at the idea of a quick escape in the event he made a fool of himself and needed to *literally* run away.

“Yeah. That would be great, actually.”

With shaky hands, he pulled his phone from his pocket and shot off a text to Jeongin.

Hyunjin [9:41 AM]

Hey, it's Hyunjin. I understand if you're busy or just don't want to so you can totally say no but I need some help finding a suit for homecoming? And I was wondering if you'd be available?

Hyunjin [9:42 AM]

To help me

Hyunjin [9:42 AM]

Today?

Hyunjin [9:43 AM]

No pressure though

Hyunjin groaned, feeling like he'd already ruined his chances when his phone went off. He looked down in amazement.

Jeongin [9:44 AM]

Hey Hyunnie! Say less. Just tell me where and what time I need to show up.

The brunette let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Um, would noon be okay, mom?" He figured that would give him enough time to eat, shower and have a good, through strategy meeting in his own mind before adventuring out into a social situation.

She checked her watch before nodding in affirmation.

With that settled, the whole table hunched over and tucked into their

breakfasts. Changbin praised Seon-min's egg frying technique after every bite, asking if he could stop by some time so she could teach him.

Chan chatted to his dad about his job, picking his brain on what he thought the most useful types of degrees were in the workforce before Changbin nearly *demanded* to clean the dishes, stating that he needed to properly thank Seon-min after having eaten her out of house and home, AKA eggs.

Between him, Chan and Hyunjin, the kitchen was sparkling in no time and the boys were declaring it time to head home.

It was just as they opened the front door that a low, menacing roll of thunder sounded behind the clouds. It had been an overcast morning but now it looked like it was going to storm.

Changbin groaned, eyeing the sky with extreme distrust before Chan shrugged and stepped out onto the front porch. "Just think of it as motivation to run faster," he joked.

This only earned another groan from Changbin and dramatically dragged footsteps.

"Good luck today, Hyunnie! Let us know if you find anything."

"And tell Jeonginnie I say hi!"

He nodded and offered a shy little wave, standing in the doorway to his home and in desperate need of a shower.

"It was nice to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Hwang!" Chan added with one final wave that Hyunjin's parents eagerly returned.

As another rumble of thunder growled through the sky, the two other boys finally departed, racing the rain to get home.

*****

By the time Hyunjin got out of the shower, the downpour had subsided to a drizzle and the whole world was wet.

He'd been pacing the foyer for nearly twenty minutes, waiting for

Jeongin to arrive. His mother, bless her soul, was sitting calmly on the bottom step of the stairs and scrolling on her phone with nary a worry.

A knock sounded on the front door and Hyunjin's heart nearly beat out of his chest. He sprung forward but just barely managed not to rip open the door like a feral beast. He took a shaky breath in before twisting the knob and swinging it open.

"Jinnie!" Jeongin crowed, bounding forward immediately and pulling him into a bouncing hug. "Guess who passed their art history final?!"

The taller boy felt a spark of sheer joy in his chest and pulled back to make excited eye contact. "You did?"

"Yes!" His eyes were nearly closed with how hard he was smiling. "And it's all thanks to you!"

"What about me?"

The unexpected second voice had Hyunjin pulling fully out of the hug to peek behind Jeongin to find Seungmin.

Jeongin leveled him a glare. "All you did was shoot spit balls at me in class."

"Yeah and it's the only thing that kept you awake in there so you're welcome."

Jeongin sighed heavily but didn't deny it. He turned back to Hyunjin before he remembered to add an explanation.

"Oh! I invited Seungmin, I hope you don't mind? He may not be a fashionista but he won't lie to save your feelings. He'll be our tie breaker if we need one."

"Totally fine," Hyunjin said with a shrug. Truly, the more the merrier; he needed all the help he could get.

"I uh, I actually invited my mom too? She needed to do some shopping anyways so she

can give us a ride."

"Oh!" Jeongin said, eyes going wide as he finally caught sight of Seon-Min standing up from the stairs. He bowed quickly. "My apologies, Mrs. Hwang! I didn't see you there."

“Yeah, you were hidden behind the giant,” Seungmin said with the barest hint of a smile. He stepped forward and offered his hand. “Kim Seungmin. And this is Yang Jeongin.”

His mom was grinning ear to ear as he wrestled her purse back on her shoulder and shook both of their hands, dipping her head over and over again as if to say ‘*thank you so much for befriending my loner son’*.

Jeongin just shined his bright smile back at her, looking so sweet and innocent until he released her hand and turned on Hyunjin. He suddenly looked very serious. Dangerous, almost.

He circled Hyunjin slowly, taking in his ripped up, loose fit jeans and the basic green sweater he was wearing under his ever present leather jacket.

Hyunjin swallowed nervously, suddenly very self conscious about his outfit choice. He would be the first to admit, his style wasn’t terribly inspired. It was made up of deep, dark jewel tones and simple cuts. Not really any patterns or flair. Just simple and easy. And normally, he didn’t really think twice about it. His clothes were clean and, while oversized, he liked to think it was tastefully so.

But under the weight of Jeongin’s calculating stare, he felt like he’d committed some kind of crime against humanity.

“Do you have a picture of Lixie’s dress?”

He scrambled to pull out his phone, desperate to prove that he wasn’t *completely* useless. He quickly pulled up the photo of the dress that Felix had sent. It was beautiful but so much less eye-catching without the blond himself in it.

He showed it to Jeongin and Seungmin, his mom hurrying over and peering between them to get a look.

“Oh, he’s going to look just *darling* in that!” Seon-Min whispered, sounding like she was close to tears or something.

But Seungmin nodded, a little half smile pulling at his lips. “That’s our Lix; a total show stopper.”

Hyunjin was nodding in agreement before he even noticed it. “Yeah, and I’m just trying not to get in the way.”

“Don’t worry, Hyunnie.” Jeongin said, with a confidence Hyunjin

could desperately use. “That’s why I’m here.”

“And I’m here because Jeongin promised me a mall pretzel.” Seungmin added, edging closer to the door like the smell of fried dough was calling to him. “So let’s get this show on the road!”

*****

“You look like an accountant who commits tax fraud.”

Seungmin was sitting down, one leg crossed over the other next to Seon-Min while Jeongin pulled and pinned the suit jacket to make it better.

“But like, not because he’s cool or something. More like he’s just bad at his job and *accidentally* commits felonies.”

Hyunjin looked down at the suit. Sure, it was a little big and the shoulders didn’t sit right but he didn’t think it was *that* bad.

“Ya know, like weaponized incompetence or something,” Seungmin added.

“Okay Seungminnie, that’s enough,” Jeongin said, giving him a gentle *look* before giving up on the jacket and taking a step back.

“Yeah, I sort of hate it.”

Hyunjin groaned. “But you’ve hated *all* of them so far.”

“I haven’t *hated* all of them. But I haven’t *loved* any of them. And that’s what we’re going for.” Jeongin corrected. He peeled the jacket off of Hyunjin’s shoulders, leaving him in a plain white button up.

Jeongin’s eyes narrowed, his head cocking to the side but it was Hyunjin’s mom who said, “The shirt is nice though. Might be good to get even if you don’t wear it to the dance.”

Jeongin nodded heartily. “True. A good white button down is a staple in any closet.” He smiled at Seon-min. “Good eye.”

He turned back to Hyunjin and patted his drooped shoulders like he could *feel* the exhaustion,. “Why don’t you get changed back into your

clothes and then we'll stop by the food court for a little break?"

"Finally!" Seungmin crowded, standing like he was ready to start running.

Jeongin rolled his eyes. "Sit down; you're starting to sound like Binnie."

Seungmin scowled at that but sat back down, impatiently bobbing his knee up and down as Seon-Min snickered next to him.

"Then hurry up so I can eat."

Hyunjin turned, feeling a bit demoralized and a *lot* tired as he walked back into the fitting room and pulled the curtain behind him.

They'd been at it for *hours.* At this point, he'd taken his shirt off and on so many times he was wondering if he should have just gone topless to begin with. His fucking nipples were starting to *chafe!* Not that he could *ever* mention that in front of the three musketeers.

Because while Hyunjin was suffering through endless piles of minutely different blazers and jackets and trousers that were someone *all* wrong in different ways, the three out there were having a *blast* like it was some makeover montage in an early 2000s teen movie.

Hyunjin's feet *ached* from standing on tiles and thin carpet all day and he was overheated as *hell.* Why was it always so *hot* in the dressing room? Why did changing clothes take so much energy and stamina? He could run 10 miles and be less exhausted than being dragged through his fourth store of the day by Jeongin and his cronies.

Because yes, his mother had completely abandoned the whole support role thing and had solidly latched on to Jeongin like they were co-stylists. And Seungmin? Seungmin just offered oddly specific feedback that was never very flattering and never failed to make Hyunjin's mom cry-laugh.

So far, according to Seungmin, Hyunjin had looked like a 'sickly alter boy', a 'divorced father of two who *really* needed to wow the judge at his next custody hearing' and 'an utter rectangle'.

Well what else had they expected? They'd dressed him in wide legged trousers and an oversized blazer with massive shoulder pads. According to Jeongin, Hyunjin had the potential to pull off something avant guard but the second he stepped out, they'd all nearly fallen to

their knees with laughter.

By the time Hyunjin shrugged his sweater back over his head, he felt like the dream of *not* looking so out of place next to Felix was slipping through his fingers.

It wasn't so much that he wanted Felix to think he looked good or something. Like yeah, that would be fucking *incredible* but he wasn't expecting miracles here. Truly, he just wanted to be able to pick Felix up and *not* embarrass the blond.

Fake date or not, he would be escorting Felix into a gymnasium full of their peers and he didn't want to be the ugly stain that ruined Felix's night.

He followed the others towards the food court, Seungmin nearly breaking into a sprint and hauling Jeongin after him.

Seon-Min laughed, her eyes so beyond happy as she glanced up at Hyunjin. "You want anything to eat or drink, Bambi?"

He was so thankful she'd waited to use his annoying nickname until the others - *especially Seungmin* - were out of earshot.

"No, I'm fine," he said even though his stomach was eating itself. He was feeling sorry for himself and really just wanted to give up, go home and engage in some good ole' fashioned wallowing.

But his mom saw through him like a ghost. She patted his shoulder and pushed him toward an empty table. "Why don't you grab us a table. I'm going to grab us some coffee."

Hyunjin collapsed into a hard plastic chair, letting his long legs unfurl. He sighed and tipped his head back, staring at the too high ceiling of the mall, letting the hustle and bustle of it move around him.

He only looked back down when the chairs across from him screeched across the tile. He found Seungmin sitting down looking *delighted,* a pretzel in each hand while Jeongin carefully set two large sodas down.

He made a little grabby hand for one of the pretzels but *of course,* Seungmin took a big bite out of it before handing it over.

"Hey!" Jeongin crowed, trying to grab the untouched pretzel in Seungmin's other hand. "Come on, give me the other one!"

Seungmin scrunched his nose playfully before stretching his neck long and licking the other pretzel, making an obscene slurping noise.

“Dude, *seriously*? What are you? Five?”

“And a half,” Seungmin said without missing a beat, smile a little wicked and looking overjoyed as he, once again, offered the pretzel with a bite out of it.

Jeongin merely gave a long, suffering sigh and accepted it with a disappointed shake of the head and angling his body away from Seungmin, shielding it with his body.

“How are you holding up?” Jeongin finally asked, a few bites in.

Hyunjin shrugged his shoulders, pretty sure his general demeanor answered for him.

“Aw, come on Hyunnie. We’ll find something, I promise.”

But Hyunjin had just crafted a one-of-a-kind invitation to his own pity party and he’d already RSVP’d. “Maybe we should just call it a day.” He said, running a blunt fingernail over this little chip in the table.

“Not like it’s a real date anyways.” He muttered, mostly to the table.

He felt a sharp kick to his shin and jerked back, eyes flying up to find Seungmin too involved with his pretzel to have been paying attention. But Jeongin? He was looking at Hyunjin with a frown.

“Fake date or not, Lixie is excited to go with you. So *no,* we can’t just ‘*call it a day’*. Not until we find an outfit that makes you a real life prince.”

Hyunjin blinked at him, a little thrown off by his sturdy tone but a *lot* thrown off by his words.

“Lix is…excited? To go with…w-with me?”

It’s not that he didn’t know he was. The blond had been excitedly texting him about it all week. But he’d assumed it had more to do with Felix being excited to wear his dress and dance with friends and get all dolled up. He didn’t *dare* to think it could have anything to do with *him.*

Seungmin snorted. “Are you kidding or just stupid?” He asked around a mouthful of pretzel.

Jeongin shoved a napkin at him before pulling out his phone. “See for yourself; he won’t shut up about it.”

He scrolled for a little bit before sliding his phone across the sticky tabletop, toward Hyunjin. The brunette leaned forward, curiosity pulling him in.

Felix [11:01 PM]

Do you think I should wear taller heels to the dance?

Felix [11:02 PM]

Since Jin Jin is so tall

Jeongin [11:02 PM]

I can hear you swooning from over here

Felix [11:03 PM]

Shut uuuupppp

Hyunjin shrugged. “I mean, sure-”

“-No.” Jeongin interrupted with a little smile. “Keep scrolling.”

Hyunjin blinked at him before glancing back down at the messages. “Okay…how far?”

Jeongin just shrugged and leaned back in his chair, arms crossed securely over his chest. “Doesn’t matter. All of it.”

“Huh?” Hyunjin’s brow furrowed, not sure he understood. He didn’t want to overstep in their personal conversations. He just wanted to make sure he was respectful of Jeongin’s privacy. So what did he mean by ‘all of it’?

Thankfully, Jeongin filled in the blanks for him. “It’s all he’s been able to talk with since you said yes. It’s *Jin Jin* this and *Jin Jin* that.”

“It’s disgusting,” Seungmin said, throwing his two cents into the ring.

Jeongin rolled his eyes. “It’s *adorable.*” But after a short pause he added, “But yeah, also a little disgusting.”

Hyunjin blinked, his mind rebelling against the hope that was trying to bloom within.

“Go on,” Jeongin urged, leaning forward again. “Keep reading.”

Hyunjin looked back down at the phone glowing in his hands like it was an ancient tome that held all the forgotten answers.

And he scrolled down.

Felix [5:45 PM]

OMG, what if he picks me up on the bike?

Felix [5:50 PM]

I should probably plan a hairstyle that won’t get totally ruined by the helmet then

He scrolled down a little bit, skipping messages almost like he could catch Felix’s message off guard. Like he could trick them into revealing something other than the truth.

That Felix had been talking about him.

A lot.

Felix [1:20 PM]

I wonder what kind of boutineer he’d like

Felix [1:21 PM]

I want to do a rose, since they're his favorite

Felix [1:22 PM]

But what if that's too boring or ordinary???

Hyunjin scrolled again, his long fingers dragging through message after message about him, his cheeks starting to feel warm.

Felix [6:38 AM]

Wow, he's going to look so good in a suit

Felix [6:40 AM]

I mean, he looks good in anything all the time anyways

Felix [6:40 AM]

But wow…

Hyunjin felt a wet little chuckle at his lips because goddammit, that was *his* line. How on *earth* was Felix getting all mushy over *him?* An overly tall loner with the social skills of a wall. He scrolled all the way down, until there was no more scrolling to be done and read the most recent conversation. One from just last night.

Jeongin [8:11 PM]

The whole school is talking about your date to the dance…

Felix [8:12 PM]

Probably jealous 🤭

Jeongin [8:13 PM]

Or wondering when our resident angel developed a thing for bad boys

Felix [8:15 PM]

Ew, no

Felix [8:16 PM]

I don't like bad boys 🙅

Felix [8:17 PM]

I like sweet things

Felix [8:17 PM]

Like cookies and cakes and love confessions in the pouring rain 🙆

Jeongin [8:18 PM]

…

Jeongin [8:19 PM]

…and Hyunjin…?

Felix [8:20 PM]

…

Felix [8:21 PM]

…and maybe like Jin Jin

Hyunjin blinked at the phone, suddenly wondering if he didn't actually know how to read. What if he'd learned wrong and thought all the words meant different things? What if he wasn't illiterate but some insane new breed of incompetent that could just horrifically misunderstand every single syllable?

Oh my god, was he finally *full* delusional? No longer was he merely dipping his toe in the water. He'd dove, head first. Cannon ball. He was *drenched* in delusion-

"Normally, I wouldn't show you all this," Jeongin said, pocketing his phone again. "But in light of the whole Minsung debacle, I'm sort of *really done* watching my friends fawn over each other and then lock into stalemates."

"Yeah, Minsung did it first anyways," Seungmin said, leaning back into his chair and sipping his soda. "Don't be such a copy cat."

Hyunjin's mind was reeling. It has all been there, in black and white. Felix had said…had said…

"By the way, do you have any available appointments before homecoming? I need a manicure," Seungmin added, eyeing his nails with mild disdain while Hyunjin was having a full moment of enlightenment.

"Oh my *god,"* Jeongin groaned, punching Seungmin in the shoulder and hissing something about *bad timing.*

Seon-min finally got back to the table. She set an ice cold coffee in front of Hyunjin.

"Here, I think a little caffeine will help." She said kindly, her eyes soft and cautious, like she could *feel* how despondent and close to breaking Hyunjin had been.

But that was *before.*

Before he'd read Felix's cute little texts about fucking *liking him?*

Hyunjin stood suddenly, his chair nearly crashing to the floor behind him. “Break over. We need to find the *perfect* outfit.”

His mother blinked up at him before looking towards Jeongin and Seungmin, smirking across the table and wadding up their trash to throw away.

Jeongin leaned forward and patted her hand, “The power of love is a crazy thing, isn't it?”

She blinked again and rose alongside the rest of the group, stuttering out, “I-I mean yeah, sure but…oh what the hell, why not?”

She shook her head, shaking the confused look right off of it and deciding to just go with the flow as he grabbed her coffee and followed the boys back into the flow of the mall.

“So far, none of the traditional looks are landing. I think we need to start thinking outside the box,” Jeongin said as they walked, head on a swivel as he analysed each store they passed.

“Something *different.* Something that makes a statement and catches attention. But still…understated.”

Hyunjin nodded, mind trying its hardest to think of something, *anything* that would make Felix smile at him from the top of the stairs.

It was time to dream big and really, all he wanted was to pick Felix up and watch him walk down the stairs in the beautiful dress and have him *smile* at Hyunjin like he was glad he'd picked him.

“We need something that's elevated but still…*you.”* Seungmin said, uncharacteristically helpful. “After all, Lixie likes *you* so it's not like we need to reinvent the wheel here. Just polish it a little.”

While Jeongin was busy asking just where Seungmin was and if that even was his real name, the words echoed through Hyunjin’s brain.

Lixie likes *you.*

Felix liked him despite everything. His reputation, his nervousness, his inability to talk without stuttering. He'd liked him the second he'd

seen Hyunjin ride into the parking lot, enough to ask Chan to help them meet. He'd trusted Hyunjin with his tail and his ears and his purrs. He had gravitated toward Hyunjin even when he'd been so sure he'd scared him off or embarrassed himself beyond repair.

After all of that, Felix still liked him for who he was.

And then he saw it.

The dull shine of a leather jacket, proudly displayed on a mannequin tucked behind the glass of a store window.

Hyunjin froze, the group behind them grumbling as they nearly collided. But he hardly registered it.

Because it was *perfect.*

*"*That." He said, raising a finger to point.

The group turned to look and a slow smile spread across Jeongin's face. "Oh my god, Lix would be so proud right now."

They rushed to the store, immediately flagging down an employee to find where the jacket was.

Hyunjin slid it on and the familiar feel of leather on his shoulder loosened his chest. It wasn't the well worn, broken in leather of his daily jacket, but that was good.

It was sleek and polished but still felt like it was calling back to who he really was. He let his fingers slide down the outside, the leather so soft.

"Oh. I think we have a winner," Seon-Min said, her eyes sparkling.

Jeongin was grinning too, making minute adjustments and circling Hyunjin. "Oh Lix is going to *love* this."

"You think?" Hyunjin asked hopefully, eyeing himself in the mirror and thinking that *he* loved it. It felt right.

"Oh, I *know,"* Jeongin smirked, his expression turning a little mysterious. "And now I have a vision. Come on, I have ideas!"

Jeongin tore through that store like a highly organized, laser guided hurricane. He darted from rack to rack, selecting pieces with precision. It was obvious that there was a method to his madness but

Hyunjin couldn't quite tell what it was.

So he just followed along like a lost puppy, letting Jeongin throw clothes into his arms as they made their way slowly toward the fitting room.

"Okay, the jacket is a must," Jeongin finally said as Hyunjin stood in the doorway of his changing stall. "Now we just need to figure out the rest. I want to see the straight cut trousers and the white button up first. Start simple."

Hyunjin nodded, feeling equally intimidated but invigorated. They were close, he could *sense* it.

The straight cut trousers were a maybe but the button down was a no. It felt too boring with the black bomber jacket.

Jeongin examined him from head to toe nearly a dozen times, chin in hand before he finally spoke. "Okay, I know we bought the white button down. But I think we scrap it, at least for the dance. We need a little more interest, a subtle pattern."

But the pinstriped shirt made him look like a 'discount loan shark' per Seungmin and the paisley print made his mom laugh out loud as soon as he appeared in it.

"Okay, try the shirt with the angled stripes and the wide leg trousers."

Hyunjin nodded, determined not to get discouraged. He closed the door to the room and shucked off the jacket for what felt like the hundredth time.

He pulled the wide leg trousers on, tucking the striped shirt in to the best of his ability. He wasn't normally one to tuck his shirts in so it always felt a little stiff, a little silly. Like he was trying to cosplay an adult or something.

He gave himself a quick glance in the mirror and while the clothes *fit,* he really didn't know what he was looking for here. He was just *him.* A little too tall, a little too lanky. Just the same old Hyunjin who tended to swim in the clothes he bought.

He stepped out, palms at his sides and angled forward as if to say 'this is it, just me again'.

But Jeongin jumped to his feet, his eyes on fire. Even Seungmin let out

a low whistle.

“Wait, wait, we need a belt!” Seon-Min crowed before peeling out of the room and making it back in record time with a black leather belt with a gold buckle.

“Oh *perfect,*” Jeongin said, sounding breathless like he was enjoying the thrill of the hunt a little too much.

Hyunjin slid it through the belt loops and tightened it before resuming his palm forward stance.

Jeongin was looking at the outfit, his lips pulling to the side in a silent question that didn’t stay silent. He leaned toward Seon-Min, eyes still on Hyunjin. “Is a tie too much?”

“Oh, I think it’s *just* enough.” She said, pulling one from behind her back with a conspiratorial little smile.

“Oh my god, I love you,” Jeongin said, eyes a little feral like he’d just met his new best friend.

Seon-Min marched right up to Hyunjin, looping it around his neck and tying a quick knot. He should have probably been a bit more embarrassed about it but honestly? He wouldn’t know how to tie it without looking up a tutorial first so he kept his mouth shut.

The tie was black with a subtle striped pattern on it.

“Are the stripes on stripes too much?” He asked, looking down at the way it clashed against his shirt.

Jeongin hummed, walking up. “Not if we do this,” and then without any further permission, he shoved the tie in between two buttons, right at Hyunjin’s chest.

“Hey!” Hyunjin squeaked, taking an involuntary step back.

Jeongin just rolled his eyes, “Oh hush and look in the mirror.”

Hyunjin wanted to scowl at him but truly, Jeongin was doing him a massive favor just by being here, let alone *styling* him. He was, underneath that blip of panic, overwhelmingly thankful for his time and effort.

So the tall brunette spun on his heels and nearly froze when he saw the nearly finished look.

Even without shoes, the look was exactly what Seungmin had described. It was him still, just dressed up another level. The belt hugged him at just the right place and with the wide leg of the trousers, it made his skinny legs look more proportional to his shoulders.

The leather of the jacket was soft and supple, gleaming dully under the dim lighting of the store and the little mess of subtle, classic patterns really did add something unique.

It wasn't terribly over the top, it wasn't show stopping or spot light stealing but it was comfortable and elegant. It was something Hyunjin could *actually* see himself wearing.

"Oh Hyunnie," His mom cooed, her hands clasped in front of her chest as she gazed at him in the mirror. "You look so handsome. Lixie is so lucky."

He couldn't help but snort at that. The *audacity* of the comment was enough to make him roll his eyes. "*I'm* the lucky one."

Seungmin made a gagging noise before finally heaving himself to his feet. "You're *both* hot and lucky so stop ogling yourself in the mirror and let's find you some shoes so I can finally go home."

The shoes were the easy part. They were simple and shiny and something that Hyunjin was sure he'd only ever wear to things like job interviews or funerals.

Within twenty minutes, everything is bought and paid for, packed nicely into crisp shopping bags and Seon-Min is driving a car full of boys home. She was just able to get Jeongin and Seungmin's addresses out of them before they conked out in the backseat, Seungmin's head snuggled in against Jeongin's shoulder in a way that he'd probably deny with his whole chest had he been awake.

Hyunjin took a quick picture, figuring a little blackmail on Seungmin wouldn't be a *bad* thing to have.

He turned back around, sitting in the passenger seat and smirking at the photo when he heard his mom's voice, low and happy.

"Are you excited, Bambi?"

He took a deep breath in and let a smile pull at his lips. "Yeah. I am." He answered simply.

*****

By the time they got home, both of them were in need of a nap. Something about a five hour shopping spree really took it out of you. Hyunjin wasted no time dumping his bag of clothes in his desk chair and burying himself under his fluffy comforter.

Two hours later when he awoke, his body was heavy with sleep and something else. Something that hummed under his skin, warm and soft. He took a deep breath, trying to infuse that feeling into his bones and blood. To let it overtake him. To let it *become* him.

He felt content in the dim lighting of his room. He rolled slowly onto his side, letting his body stretch long, his muscles bunching up before releasing with a delicious liquidity.

He pulled himself out of bed and padded down the hallway to use the bathroom. And when he re-entered his room with a long yawn, he couldn't help but stop by the shopping bag in his chair, calling to him like some kind of promise.

With giddy fingers, he pulled the tissue paper out of the bag and pulled each piece out like it was gold. He examined them each carefully, admiring the design of them and how they some how worked together. He didn't think they should, not at first glance. But on a body? On *his* body? It worked somehow.

Curious to see that magic happen again, he carefully put each piece on, trying to remember the ways that Jeongin had tugged and cinched to make it sit *just* right. He looked up a quick tutorial on how to tie the tie, trying his hardest to commit it to memory and knowing it simply wouldn't stay. It never did, no matter how many times he tried to learn. His brain just wasn't meant to house information like windsor knots.

He tucked the tie away like Jeongin had earlier and turned toward his mirror, stunned to see the man from earlier staring back at him.

He felt this fledging hope bubble up inside his chest, wondering what he'd look like to Felix. Would he earn that smile he so desperately wanted? Would Felix insist on pictures at his side? Something he could look back on years later, when high school was over and gone?

He didn't want to wait until next weekend. It felt too far away.

Biting his lower lip, he grabbed his phone and zoomed in a little. The selfie only captured the lower part of his jaw and the left side of his chest. A sample of the outfit. Just a little teaser.

He took a deep breath, reminding himself that Felix was *excited.* He'd seen it in black in white. In *writing.* And he'd never sweep him off his feet if he kept living in fear.

After all, you never got better at something if you didn't practice, right?

Hyunjin [5:44 PM]

Homecoming outfit acquired

Hyunjin [5:44 PM]

[image attached]

Hyunjin [5:45 PM]

Just a little spoiler

He fought the urge to throw his phone across the room and instead stood rooted in his spot, eyes finding his own in the mirror again.

"You've got this," He said quietly to his reflection.

When his phone buzzed, he took another deep breath and looked.

Lixie💕 [5:47 PM]

Oh my god

Lixie💕 [5:48 PM]

If you were running for homecoming king, you'd have my vote

Hyunjin shook his head, astounded at Felix. He was just so sweet, so cute. So utterly

oblivious to the kind of effect he had on Hyunjin.

Hyunjin [5:49 PM]

Only if you were the homecoming queen

He bit his lip *hard.* Was it too much? He'd never really flirted before. He didn't know *how*

to flirt. He'd *just* mastered plain conversations about the weather. But banter? The back and forth of flirting? He felt his heart pick up speed.

Lixie💕 [5:50 PM]

Jin Jiiiiiin, you're making me blush

A little spark of excitement flooded through Hyunjin. Maybe it wasn't about being good at playing some kind of game. Maybe it was just about being honest.

Hyunjin [5:51 PM]

Good. That's the goal

At the winky face, he *did* throw his phone. He'd never once in his *life* sent a winky face emoji. Who would he have sent that to? His *mother?*

He took a few laps around his room, feeling like a caged animal. Maybe a second run would do him some good.

He stripped off his new clothes, hanging them carefully, damn near reverently, in his closet. He pulled on some sweats and an oversized t-shirt and was just about to grab some socks when he heard his phone buzz on his bed.

He paused for a second before deciding it was better to just bite the bullet. Was he committing to this or was he going to just second guess every single word he said from here on out?

He knew it was the second one but he wanted to pretend to be brave. So he grabbed his phone and unlocked it to find a screenshot from Jeongin of his text thread with Felix.

Felix [5:53 PM]

[screenshot attached]

Felix [5:54 PM]

internal screaming

Felix [5:54 PM]

*** external screaming***

Felix [5:54 PM]

❤□□❤□□❤□□😭😭😭□□

Felix [5:54 PM]

OH MY GODDDDDDDDDD

Hyunjin stared at the screenshot, marvelling at how much it resembled his diary entries about the blond. But then another message came in from Jeongin.

Jeongin [5:55 PM]

Good job, Hyunnie 👍

Chapter End Notes

> Two things...1. The outfit Hyunjin is wearing is based on the one he wore to the Versace Spring/Summer 2026 show. And 2. Next chapter is our angsty-est one of the whole story so STRAP IN!! See you on Sunday!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> FINALLY! It's FINALLY Sunday!! 😩😩😩 A big, huge, massive thank you to everyone who's still reading, leaving kudos, comments and just supporting me and this story. I don't think I'll ever get over the idea that people like my writing enough to scream about it on the internet NOW, while we got some angst to get through this chapter, let me assure you, Jin Jin will make it all better Sooooo, LET'S GOOOOO!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear diary,

This week has been…weird.

Not in a bad way but more in like a 'did I slip into an alternate dimension?' sort of way.

Ever since Jeongin showed me Felix's texts, I feel like something has changed and I'm not sure if it's me or Felix or both of us.

Like, did Felix always blush this much? Because I swear to god, I show up at our lockers in the morning and he blushes. I walk into calculus and he blushes. He nudges my shoulder while we walk to lunch and he blushes. *And oh my* god, *every single fucking day in study hall, he drags his desk over, right next to mine and I swear to* god *I can feel the heat radiating off of his cheeks!*

Surely, that has to be new, right? How could I have missed how gorgeous his freckles look when they're swimming in pink? How would I not notice how much he batts his fucking eyes or bites his lips when he looks at me? As an expert *in the field of hyperfocusing on Felix, I would have noticed these things! Right?!?!*

I'm trying so hard *to play it cool and keep it casual and not declare my undying love for him but he's making it so fucking* hard. *In more ways than one! I haven't been able to sleep without* those *kinds of dreams all week!*

So honestly? Maybe I'm just so sleep deprived that I'm hallucinating all of it?

That would make more sense than Felix liking me back, honestly.

But I guess it wouldn't explain why he asked me to come to the homecoming game on Friday…

I've never been to a game before. I'm not even really sure what sport it is, to be honest. But he looked up at me and he looked all shy and adorable and he was rocking on his heels like he was nervous and he asked if I'd come to the game to watch him cheer.

And seriously, what else was I supposed to do besides say yes??

If an angel asks you to do something, you do it. End of. Period.

So like…rah rah, go team or whatever.

*****

The air was crisp and cool like fall had finally, fully descended. Hyunjin had taken one step outside of his house, promptly turned right back around and changed from his thin t-shirt to a thicker sweater. He'd layered his beat up comfort blanket of a leather jacket on top before gripping his keys and worrying the little rose keychain Felix had made him between his fingers. If he paid close attention, he swore he could feel the tiny little ridges of Felix's fingerprints left behind in the clay.

It really shouldn't make him swoon nearly as much as it did, but there he was, starting up his bike and thinking about just how gorgeous Lix was going to look at the top of the pyramid, shining under the huge field lights.

He'd ridden to the school nearly on autopilot, mind pre-occupied with the hope that Felix

would find him in the crowd and smile at him and just him. Which was honestly sort of impossible considering how big this school was and how many people would be in the bleachers but *still.* The romantic in Hyunjin could dream.

He approached the front gates, loitering like the no good delinquent most people thought he was while he scrolled on his phone, sending a

message to the group chat.

Hyunjin [6:40 PM]

Here

He let out a shaky breath. He loved reading the chaos in the group chat but he rarely participated. A little part of him feared that he'd say the wrong thing or make a stupid spelling error or that they'd actually *remember* they'd added him and regret it.

His panic was short lived though as his phone buzzed in his hand.

Minho [6:41 PM]

Just parked, walking toward the field now

Chan [6:41 PM]

I got Innie and just picked up Seungminnie! Should be there in 5!

"Jin! Over here!"

Hyunjin's head snapped up, following the sound of Minho's voice until he found the brunette struggling through the crowd towards him. And not because the crowd was particularly rowdy or thick but because he had Jisung glued to his side like they were entered into a three legged race.

Jisung was busy melting into Minho's side, hugging his arm to his chest like it was the only thing in the world that truly mattered.

Hyunjin couldn't keep the little smile from blooming on his lips at the sight. "Hey you two," he said.

"Hyunnie!" Jisung crowed, finally realizing that other people besides Minho did indeed exist. He let go of his *boyfriend* and bounded

forward to give Hyunjin a quick hug.

“You excited to see Lix in action tonight?” He asked with a wide grin and a raised eyebrow.

And dammit, Hyunjin was hoping he could blame the blush on the chill in the air but he still nodded. “Yeah. And Binnie.” He added for good measure.

Minho rolled his eyes and stepped forward to thread his fingers through Jisung’s so effortlessly. Like they’d been doing it for years.

“Sorry to crush your dreams but there’s no Binnie tonight.”

Hyunjin frowned, head tilting to the side. “No Binnie?”

Minho shrugged, shuffling out of the main flow of people so they could wait for the others off to the side. “Sounds like he caught a cold. Chan said something about running in the rain?”

“How dramatic,” Jisung said before pausing, his look contemplative. “Or *romantic*… you ever thing he and Chan-”

“Han Jisung, do *not* finish that sentence.”

The three of them turned to find Chan approaching, eyes rolling at the audacity of such an insinuation.

“What? I think it would be cute! Both of you are like…ripped.”

“Yes and as everyone knows, that *is* the foundation for a healthy, solid relationship.” Seungmin deadpanned.

Jisung rolled his eyes and merely tucked himself closer to Minho like he’d decided he was done with everyone else already.

Chan snickered but nodded, attention turning to Hyunjin. “Yeah, we got caught in the storm after we left your place last weekend. By the time we got to my house, it was pouring. I offered to drive him the rest of the way home but the asshole was having way too much fun splashing in puddles and pretending to be the main character in some action movie.”

Hyunjin chuckled, able to see it so clearly. The way Changbin would grin and run too fast until he was out of breath, still having the time of his life.

“Sounds like Binnie,” Hyunjin muttered, shaking his head fondly.

Chan nodded, saying something like ‘doesn’t it?’ before Jeongin piped up. “The whole school is going to turn out for this game! Let’s go get a good spot before they’re all taken!”

Hyunjin was astounded by how much that *wasn’t* an exaggeration. He knew homecoming games were popular. He’d seen it all over media, read about it in stories and seen it in so many high school romcoms. But he wasn’t really prepared for the sheer *energy* and *noise* of the entire student body, outside of school hours and teeming with excitement.

It was palpable. It thrummed under his feet, vibrating in the thin metal seats and stairs of the bleachers. People laughed too hard and spilled sodas and munched on stale, cheap nachos they’d bought at the concession stand. People took endless selfies with their friends, probably posting them to their socials with captions like *Win today, celebrate tomorrow!*

Because *tomorrow* was the dance. Tomorrow was the day Hyunjin would don his pseudo-suit and ride to Felix’s house and pick him up like a real, live gentleman. Tomorrow was the day he would gather up all his courage and take Felix’s hand so he could walk him into the gymnasium like the fucking prize he was.

But he’d need to survive this crush of bodies and *not* melt whenever Felix pranced out in his short cheer skirt first.

Chan somehow spotted an empty stretch of seats and motioned everyone to follow him like the fearless leader he was.

The crowd was dense, the further in they got and Hyunjin saw Jeongin in front of him, twist around to make sure he was still there. Without a second though, he reached out, grabbing his hand and linking him to the group.

It sent a rush of warmth through Hyunjin. And not in the same way it did when Felix grabbed his hand out of excitement or something. But in a way that felt grounding. Almost like he *belonged* with this group or something.

The snaked their way through the crowd, heads ducked and muttering near constant apologies while Chan fucking charmed his way through the crowd. Everyone knew his name, everyone smiled as he passed or clapped him on the shoulder or made some joke about him leading his

herd to safety or whatever.

And Chan just grinned back, easy as pie like he truly enjoyed every single person he passed. Which, statistically was probably impossible but still, he made it look convincing.

And there, at the end of their merry little line, was Hyunjin. Pulled by Jeongin and feeling the eyes of everyone they passed sliding over him with interest.

He hadn't heard any direct whispers in a little while but he had to assume that most people *knew* he sat at the same lunch table as Chan and the others. They'd seen how he'd *kept* sitting there. How they hadn't chased him off yet or even *asked* him to leave. They hadn't migrated to a different table when he sat down or simply given him the cold shoulder.

Felix walked with him through the hallways, yapping away with a bright smile. He and Minho had probably been spotted studying in the library and he wouldn't be terribly surprised if at least one person had seen him running with Chan and Binnie at some point.

The halls still parted around him when he walked. No one struck up conversation with him willingly. But they didn't dive out of the way anymore either. The rumor mill had quieted some. It had *evolved* from speculation of just how many fights he'd been in, to a soft wondering about just who the *hell* he actually was.

And it was all thanks to the group of boys currently daisy chaining their way through the crowd like the friendliest snake you'd ever met.

They finally made it, swallowed whole by the crowded bleachers, Chan smiling and asking people to scoot over to make room, giggling and laughing and apologizing for having such a big group.

But no one gave a shit, no one pushed back because it was *Chan* and if you got angry at Chan, you'd probably be viewed as public enemy number one by a majority of people in this school. Maybe even the world.

Hyunjin sat down, phone grasped tightly in his lap and not really sure what he was supposed to do. Where did he look? The game hadn't started yet and he didn't see the cheer squad down on the field.

He glanced down the line, watching how Jisung offered Minho a nacho *dripping* in fake cheese and grinning like an idiot when Minho

humored him and accepted it with a smirk. He watched Seungmin roll his eyes at the exchange while Chan beamed like a proud father. Jeongin snorted next to him and glanced at Hyunjin.

“Gross, isn’t it?” But his smile was too wide, his eyes too sparkly to hold any real contempt.

So Hyunjin smiled back. “Disgusting.”

Jeongin grinned wider, revealing his stark white smile before he stood, eyeing the concession stand on the other end of the field like his biggest regret in life. “I think I’m going to get a soda before the game starts. You want anything?”

He really didn’t but he sort of hated the idea of Jeongin having to fight his way through the crowd on his own. So he stood as well, nodding his head. “Sure. I’ll go with you.”

They shouted out to the rest that they were getting snacks and Seungmin *immediately* demanded Jeongin get him a pretzel and *immediately* refused to accompany them.

“At first glance, you’d think Lix or Jisungie would be the princess of the group but the real royalty here is Seungmin,” Jeongin scoffed as they started to move. “Royal pain in my ass.” He muttered, just loud enough for Hyunjin to hear.

Hyunjin used that little shred of dark aura he still carried with him to help part the sea of people a bit easier.

They made it to the concession stand, weirdly out of breath for having walked so slow the whole time and overheated. Hyunjin shrugged out of his jacket, folding it over his arm as they got in line.

“You excited to see Lixie cheer?” Jeongin asked, leaning into Hyunjin enough to nudge their shoulders a bit.

The taller boy could feel his cheeks turning red, biting his bottom lip. But he didn’t want to lie. It was kind of pointless, especially with Jeongin. “Yeah.” He admitted.

Jeongin smiled at him and nodded, finally looking forward again. “You should be. He’s really talented. And like, I know you saw him at the pep rally but games are different. Lixie always says that the pep rally is like rehearsal and games are the *show*.” He sprinkled in little jazz hands for good measure.

Hyunjin bit his bottom lip harder. God, Lix was so fucking cute. He could see exactly how Felix would say it, jazz hands and all.

“I’m just happy he asked me to come,” Hyunjin admitted shyly, shifting in line as it crept forward. “It’s nice to be invited.”

“Well *duh,* of course he invited you,” Jeongin said with an eyeroll implied. “He’s *obsessed* with you.”

The brunette looked down at his feet, shuffling them a little on the concrete before he felt another nudge to his side.

“And if he hadn’t? We would have.”

“You would?” He didn’t mean to ask but it just slipped out.

Once again, eye roll heavily implied, Jeongin said, “Of course. That’s what friends are for.”

Hyunjin should have been used to hearing that word by now but it always hit a little different when someone just *said* it. Not implied, not insinuated, just *stated.* Clear and simple. Like Felix’s texts had been.

It was helpful for someone like Hyunjin who was predisposed to doubt everything, even reality if it seemed a little too kind.

They finally made it to the front of the line, having to shout their order over the din of the crowd to some incredibly frazzled volunteers who moved like they were on fire. A pretzel and two sodas were shoved into their hands in something like 10 seconds flat, the person panting behind the register nearly forgetting to ask them for money.

The goods secured, they made their way back to the lion's den, AKA the bleachers. They slunk through, sorrys on the tip of their tongues as they weaseled their way back to their spots.

When they finally made it, the pretzel was passed down to a pleased Seungmin and Jeongin raised his hand for a high five from Hyunjin.

It didn’t take much longer for a wave of cheering to swell across the crowd, pulling Hyunjin’s curious eyes to the field.

And down on the green, there was the cheer squad. Bright and peppy and waving their pom poms, they came prancing under the lights with smiles wide. It took Hyunjin maybe three whole seconds to find Felix.

His blond hair was gleaming under the lights and even though he

must have been half frozen in that little skirt, he grinned like it was the middle of summer and sunny.

“Go Lixie!”

Jisung hopped up, nearly dumping the last of his nachos on the person in front of him as he pitched forward violently. Almost like he’d been expecting it, Minho reached up and grabbed the back of his shirt without even looking, saving him from face planting down the stands.

“That’s my friend!” Jisung screamed, bouncing on his toes as he waved like he’d been lost at sea for days and was finally seeing help on the horizon.

Even though his voice was buried under the sound of catcalls and stomping feet, Hyunjin *swore* that Felix’s eyes were sweeping the stands, looking for them.

The game was getting ready to start and it was time to get everyone in the fighting spirit. The cheerleaders lined up, facing the stands and beaming like they were getting paid. They led the crowd through a few call and answer type cheers - *When I say Go, you say Bears* sort of thing - before the principal walked out to a crackling microphone that echoed so bad it was nearly impossible to tell what the hell they were saying. But it was probably something about school spirit and pride or something and then the marching band was playing something punchy and energetic and the team was running out onto the field to a *roar* of applause and shouts.

“Oh, it’s *soccer,*” Hyunjin said under his breath, putting two and two together finally when he saw the cleats and finally noticed the goals on each end of the grass.

Jeongin yelped a startled laugh next to him, head wiping over to him in disbelief. “Wait, are you saying you came to the game without even knowing *what sport* it was?”

Hyunjin merely shrugged. “It didn’t matter. Lix asked me to come, so I came.”

It was horrendously honest but it earned him a crinkle eyed smile from Jeongin and an arm hooked over his neck in utter delight.

“Blind devotion looks good on you, Hyunnie. And it’s *exactly* what Lixie deserves.”

Hyunjin shook his head, eyes glued to the blond even as the cheerleaders stood off to the side, watching the players enter the field.

When the ball was in motion, typically the cheer squad stayed still. They watched the game or joked around on the sidelines, ruffling their shiny pom-poms absent mindedly. But Felix kept turning around, eyes roving over the stands like he was searching.

And god, Hyunjin's heart fucking leapt at that because it was *just* like he'd hoped. It was feeding that romantic little corner of his brain, making his pulse race under his skin.

And then it happened. That little moment he'd dreamed of. That moment he'd seen in countless movies that always made him ache and yearn for someone who would search the world for him. For someone that wouldn't give up until they *found* him.

Felix's eyes froze, locked on Hyunjin's staring straight back and it was like the whole world fell away. He swore, the crowd got quieter, the game ceased to exist and the bright lights on the field all converged to settle on only Felix, like a spotlight.

He could hear the hum of his heartbeat in his ears, feel his blood rushing to his face as he slowly raised his hand and offered a little wave.

The most beautiful smile bloomed on Felix's face; wide and careless and so very happy. Like he was seeing the most beautiful thing in the world; the only thing he'd ever really wanted.

His little fingers raised up to daintily wave back. It felt private. Not a secret, but like it was meant for him and only him.

A sharp whistle cut through the moment finally, a horn blaring from somewhere overhead as the first half was called to an end.

The sound flooded back into Hyunjin's world and he was suddenly reminded that he was drowning in an ocean of his peers. Hundreds of people, shoulder to shoulder and somehow, Felix had found him and made him feel like the only man on earth.

Hyunjin's stupid hand was still hovering in the air, poised in a now dead wave. He clenched his fingers closed, aching to feel the soft fur of Felix's ears under them. Maybe after the game, if he wasn't too tired. Maybe he could offer him a ride home. Maybe he could steal a

few seconds alone with him. Just the dark asphalt and the cold air and the rumble of his bike underneath them both.

God, it sounded like a dream.

A cheesy, wonderful, silly teenage dream and *fuck,* he wanted it.

Some of the spectators around him shuffled, taking the break as a moment to stretch their legs or take a quick bathroom break. But a majority of people stayed put because the halftime show was about to start.

Hyunjin watched with eager anticipation as the cheer squad hurried into formation, the principal making their way back over to that rickety little podium and static-y mic to say more indistinguishable words.

They ended with a flair, arms extended in glee toward the cheer squad that was ready to go when all of a sudden there was a commotion down on the field. Hyunjin couldn't quite tell what it was, the people in front of him leaping to their feet and whispering like mad.

He started to rise but before he even *saw* for himself what was happening, he heard a new voice wash over the field.

"Felix!"

Hyunjin froze, half standing and certain he must be hallucinating. Because he'd just heard Felix's name said into the mic, washing over the crowd as students cackled, the excitement of a scene taking over with a jittery energy that Hyunjin *hated.*

"Mr. Cha, you can't just-"

"*Felix!"*

Hyunjin's eyes shot over to lock with Chan's, landing on every face in between to see mirror masks of shock. As a unit, they all blinked before jumping to their feet, disbelief ripe in Hyunjin's heart because *surely* Ho-Jin wouldn't be this stupid.

Right?

But alas, there he was, microphone in hand, the poor principal trying to play it cool and failing. They were alternating between *hissing* at Ho-Jin to give the mic back and offering the crowd a sickly smile that

did little to reassure.

Minho looked shocked, a look Hyunjin had never seen on his face before. “Holy shit, you don’t think he’d really-”

“Will you go to homecoming with me?”

A collective gasp swept through the stands, a few catcalls mixed in.

The whispering intensified, the town gossips *loving* every second of this boy's daring stunt. Perhaps they thought it was bold. Perhaps they thought it was *romantic.* Perhaps they thought it was stupid. Or perhaps they thought it was all of those things at once but all Hyunjin could think about was Felix.

His eyes nailed themselves to the frozen blond on the grass. His eyes were wide and unmoving, staring at Ho-Jin like he was *begging* him to stop. He looked uncomfortable. He was gripping his pom-poms like it was the only thing holding him together.

But Ho-Jin either couldn’t see it or didn’t want to. He was grinning nervously, foolishly hopeful that this grand gesture would *finally* win Felix over. And sure, maybe it would if he hadn’t spent the last ten plus years pulling his tail and dumping water over him and never heeding to the word *no.*

Hyunjin felt his breath hitch, anxiety crawling up his spine.

“Just…say yes, okay?” Ho-Jin urged, somehow still so confident. “Be my date. Go to homecoming with me.”

He took a step forward like he wanted to get closer but Hyunjin caught the subtle shift in Felix’s stance. The way his tense muscles uncoiled just enough to let him step back. Like it was instinct. Like he wanted nothing to do with Ho-Jin or this whole embarrassing debacle.

Big brown eyes flicked out and into the crowd, landing on Hyunjin immediately like he’d memorized exactly where he could find him. Like he needed some strength or encouragement or even just someone to recognize that this whole thing was sort of really fucking awkward.

Hyunjin offered him a sad smile, trying his hardest to say, ‘*I’m sorry this is happening, Lixie’* with his eyes.

And he thought maybe Felix got it because there was a little tilt of his head, a tiny acknowledgement before he turned back to the obtusely

optimistic Ho-Jin and just shook his head no with that same sad smile.

It was Ho-Jin's turn to freeze, his smile turning from hopeful and damn near giddy to something stiff and unfriendly.

He stared at Felix like he couldn't *believe* his grand plan hadn't worked. Like he'd truly believed that this had been his way in. Like he'd never even *considered* the alternative where Felix turned him down.

Finally still, the principal plucked the microphone from Ho-Jin's hand, huffing audibly into the mic like like they were regretting every deciding to get into education as a career.

"Ah, young love," the principal chuckled awkwardly into the mic, the words echoing thickly through the air. "It makes you do *incredibly* reckless things, doesn't it."

A few of the parents in the bleachers attempted to chuckle at that, still tingling with the aftershocks of the secondhand embarrassment.

"Now, if we can *please* continue as rehearsed." The principal hissed, eyes sharp on the cheer squad. It took a second but they all seemed to take a deep breath and step back into formation. Even Ho-Jin, a little hollow, stepped back into the pack, eyes flicking to Felix now and again with a frown.

The hyped up mix track started and even though the cheer team put on bright, pageant winning smiles, it felt extra fake after what had just occurred.

The crowd bopped politely along, giving gentle applause when the tumbler did a back hand spring across the front but it was lacking the same energy and excitement Hyunjin knew they'd normally get. The appreciation they *deserved.*

And god bless Jisung because he must have been thinking the same thing because after a quick look around the brunette started jumping, hollering at the top of his lungs and dancing along with the routine like he knew it.

He was hyping up the crowd, beaming at everyone around them and trying to get them invested. A few of the rows behind them started to loosen up, some joy working back into the crowd.

“Go Lixie, go!” Chan yelled, shoving his fingers into his mouth and throwing in an ear splitting whistle. The gaggle of girls in front of him screamed in delight, covering their ears and yelling at him over their shoulders joyously but they were cheering immediately after.

The tension was melting away and Hyunjin was glad because Felix looked like a fucking *star* up there. His hips moved to the beat, his smile never once wavering even though Hyunjin *knew* his heart must be beating a million miles an hour.

The formations shifted, two men approaching Felix on either side. The blond set a hand on each of their shoulders and in a flash, he was lifted into the air, one guy holding a foot each and bracing the blond up in the air. He beamed at the crowd, pulling one leg up to stand and grin at the crowd before he hopped, twisting on his way down to be caught.

Hyunjin’s heart was hammering. He’d seen Felix perform only once before and had been impressed then but this time? This time he was *stunned.*

The lights glinted off him so beautifully, highlighting all those little adjustments that Felix had learned all on his own. His tail tucking in close so as to not ruin the lines of the tight formations. The way his ears would pin closer to his head when he came down from a lift, almost like he was trying to be more aerodynamic.

It was fascinating.

Hyunjin was grinning ear to ear, the music too fast and changing rapidly from one beat to the next as the routine grew, never missing a single step.

Twin tumblers ran from the back, flipping over and over and over again until you thought surely they wouldn’t be able to land another until they *did!*

It was thrilling. The best part of the entire game and sure, Hyunjin was bias. But he honestly thought that even if he hadn’t been madly in love with the man who was climbing to the top of the pyramid like the fucking star on a Christmas tree, he’d still like halftime the most.

The blond struck a pose, high up in the air before he was helped down with a little jump, fluid and bouncy like it was effortless.

The tempo was racing, the rhythm getting faster and faster as the

routine reached a fever pitch.

Everyone was in sync, the missing hole left behind by Binnie effortlessly filled in and disappearing like it had never even been there. Hyunjin could see the little beads of sweat starting to glimmer under the lights, even in the autumn chill and he *knew* how hard they'd worked to make it look so goddamn easy.

Two of the other fliers on the squad were tossed toward one another, crossing paths in mid-air and landing in the opposite basket of arms while Felix was readying for another big jump.

Hyunjin saw the blond take a deep breath, his eyes laser focused even if he was smiling like it was all fun and games. They bounced him once, twice and then he was up!

Flying into the air, limbs long and lean as he beamed at the crowd.

But there was something behind that smile. Something that no one else would catch unless they knew his facial expressions like the back of their hand. Like it was their favorite hobby. Like it was their sole purpose for existing.

Like Hyunjin.

There was unease behind his smile. Something edged in distrust and Hyunjin couldn't help the way his gaze drifted down just in time to see *who* had thrown him.

And who was responsible for catching him.

"*No,"* He breathed, his entire spine straightening into ice.

Because there was Ho-Jin, face scowling up in the air as Felix fell like a star toward him. And before Hyunjin could call out or even hope that he wouldn't go *that* far, he did.

Ho-Jin stepped ever so slightly to the side, his hand placement just a little wrong.

And Felix fell to the ground with a crash.

The joy that had bled back into the crowd rushed out in a gasp. Someone screamed. The rest went quiet.

The music was still playing, echoing in the empty stadium like it was mocking them. But when it cut off with a screech, it almost felt worse

to be plunged into silence.

Because then Hyunjin could hear it. A little paper thin scream coming from the grass.

And suddenly he was moving.

He didn't say sorry, he didn't apologize when he stepped on toes or accidentally shoulder checked someone. He simply barreled *forward,* down the bleachers themselves because it was quicker and because everyone already thought he was a deviant who had no respect for others.

Fuck it.

Let them be right.

All that mattered was getting to Lix *now.*

He could hear the crash of footsteps close behind, certain it was Chan and the others as the cheer squad closed ranks on the field, concealing Felix from view. The coaches had all rushed out, some of the soccer players even leaning off the bench or edging closer with worried looks.

But Hyunjin didn't care who he had to push, who he had to forcibly move because Lix was *hurt* and he couldn't just do *nothing.*

He reached the front of the bleachers and didn't even hesitate as he vaulted over the top railing and landed outside the sidelines. He didn't pause, he didn't even think about the fact that the entire school was watching him sprint across the green like his life depended on it because Felix felt *too* far away right now and he needed to *see* him.

He could hear the commotion of the little huddle surrounding Felix, the coos of worry and gentle rumble of whispers but there was something else. Something frantic sounding from the very middle.

"Lixie?"

Hyunjin started trying to peel bodies off the pack, desperate to crack his way inside. He was just about to slide his arm between two cheerleaders to pry them apart like a door when he heard a snort off to the side.

His hackles raised as if on instinct and something cold and ugly seized

his heart. It was like his body knew it before his brain even registered it. His fist clenched, his jaw set like stone as he whirled around to see Ho-Jin rolling his eyes like Felix wasn't on the *fucking* ground.

"*You-"* Hyunjin hissed, his voice dark and stormy in a way he didn't know it could be.

Hyunjin had never been prone to violence, despite all the rumors. So the red tinging his vision? The way his knuckles *ached* to make contact? It didn't make much sense to him. But then again, he'd always been a man of few words. He'd never been good at holding conversations or confronting people. So perhaps this *did* make sense.

He took a step forward, his arm starting to draw back with a raw, shaking kind of anger that was formless and ready to destroy.

But a hand clapped down on his shoulder just in time, followed by Chan's voice forced through his heavy breathing. "Jin, not here. You'll get suspended."

And if he got suspended, he wouldn't be able to attend homecoming. He'd be proving everyone right. He'd give them a live show proving all of their suspicions about him.

He took a deep breath, his rage dimming just a little into something he could think through. Ho-Jin wasn't fucking worth it; he never would be.

Hyunjin's shoulders dropped ever so slightly before he heard a *hiss* from the center of the circle and then he was moving again.

He broke his way through the cheer squad and coaches to find Felix on the ground. He was curled up on his side, eyes wide and scared. His ears were pinned to his head, flat as could be and he was *clutching* his tail to his chest. It was bent at an unnatural angle but anytime someone tried to approach, Felix was scooting back, spitting and hissing and looking so terrified.

Because Felix didn't like people touching his tail even when it was fine and healthy. But now it was hurt - maybe even *broken* - and the crowd kept trying to press in on him. Trying to help in a way that was only scaring him even more.

"Lixie," Hyunjin whispered, dropping low and trying to get closer to his eye level.

He watched as the blond's fluffy ear flicked, like it had finally heard a noise it trusted. Felix blinked through the thick haze of tears in his eyes, trying to find the source of the one thing that was cutting through the noise.

He was looking for Hyunjin. Again.

He'd looked for him in a sea of people. He'd *found* him and *seen* him and made Hyunjin feel like the only guy in the world.

And now, in a moment of fear and panic, he was looking for him again.

And that? That was more than just cheesy romance. That was more than silly, young crushes and lighthearted cliches.

It was something old and worn. It was something like comfort or instinct or honesty. It was vulnerable in an unpolished way that made Hyunjin think of freckles and tangled curls.

It was his favorite kind of beautiful that never failed to make his heart *fucking melt.*

"Hey Lixie, it's okay." Hyunjin said, crawling forward in an awkward squat. He wanted to stay low, catch his eye. Assure him that it was all going to be okay.

Those big brown eyes finally flashed over to him, stilling as he bit his bottom lip. Slowly, his ears peeled off the top of his head. Still tucked close but not as tense.

"Jin Jin," Felix said, voice breaking. "M-my, it, i-it hurts." His shoulders were caving in like he could shield his tail from the entire world.

"Can I see it?" Hyunjin whispered, finally close enough to touch but holding back. Felix's body was still tense, angling away from all the onlookers like they were going to pounce in on him and rip his tail from his hands.

The blond looked around at the dumbstruck faces around them and seemed to get smaller before looking back to Hyunjin. "I don't…" He looked around again, eyes passing over the crowd around him, overwhelm clear on his face.

His grip tightened, pulling a flinch from the blond as he squeezed his

tail too tight. His breathing was starting to come quicker, like he didn't want to be here. Like it was bad enough to be hurt but to have other people trying to touch his tail on top of that?

Zero plan in mind, Hyunjin made an executive decision as the first tear fell. "Come on Lix, I got you,"

He reached forward and pulled Felix into his arms. He was so small it was easy to hoist him off the ground and the way the blond clung to him made him think perhaps he'd made the right call.

"Locker rooms have a first aid kit," someone - maybe the coach - said.

So Hyunjin made his way across the field, a shivering kitten in his arms and warm tears falling onto his shoulder. He could hear the low murmur from the stands and he could only imagine the rumors that would be born from this moment but fuck, he really didn't care.

All that mattered right now was finding a way to make Felix smile again.

He found his way to the locker rooms after a little trial and error, not willing to interrupt Felix's sorrow to ask for directions.

The locker room was dark, moonlight shining in through the small windows up high. It was enough to work with and Hyunjin didn't have the patience to find a light switch. Instead, he tore the office up looking for the fucking first aid kit only to find it prominently displayed near the door.

He sighed, trying to calm his nerves because Lix needed steady hands right now. Not the mess he was currently trying not to be.

He raced back to Felix who was sitting on one of the long wooden benches. He had his tail pulled to his chest again, his face buried in the fluffy end of it, small sobs wracking his body.

Hyunjin sat down next to him, heart utterly aching.

He opened the kit to find it hardly touched inside. He searched it until he realized he had literally no idea what he was supposed to do for a broken tail.

He pulled his phone from his jeans pocket and opened a browser, searching '*how to fix a broken cat tail*'.

He thumbed through articles all urging you to take your cat to the vet *immediately* in the event of a bad break. Hyunjin swallowed nervously and kept scrolling. Obviously, Lix would probably need an x-ray at some point but for right now, he just needed something that would help even a little bit. Even just temporarily until he could get him home.

“Alright, looks like we can do a splint or just bandage it up tightly but you’ll probably want to have your parents take you to the hospital for an x-ray later.”

Felix whimpered but nodded.

“Can I see your tail?” Hyunjin asked quietly, palm out and as non-threatening as he could make it.

Felix’s grip slowly loosened on his tail, displaying that nasty bend where it shouldn’t be.

Carefully, slowly, Hyunjin slid his fingers under Felix’s tail as it fell into his hands with so much trust.

Lix was normally the brave one between them, but right now? Right now, it was Hyunjin’s turn and he wouldn’t let him down.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I broke my finger?”

The blond blinked once, a soupy little sniff before he shook his head.

Hyunjin nodded calmly, pulling the gauze from the first aid kit and peeling the plastic packaging off of it. “Yeah, I think I was like ten? Maybe a little older, I don’t know.”

He carefully unspooled a little of the gauze, letting Felix’s tail lay in his lap, unnaturally still. It wasn’t swishing and swaying like it normally did. Instead it sat like a timid creature on its death bed.

“I uh…god, it’s so embarrassing. You have to promise not to laugh.”

“Embarassing?” Felix asked, voice still a little tender but his eyes finally lifted off his tail to glance at Hyunjin’s face and that felt like a win.

Hyunjin sighed, a little smile working its way onto his lips. Because he’d never told anyone this story before, swearing to himself that he’d take it to his grave but here he was, divulging his darkest secrets to

make a cute boy smile.

He sighed, long and loud as he *slowly* began to wind the gauze around Felix's tail with gentle fingers. "Yeah."

The first loop of gauze made, he continued, eyes glued to his work. "So, we'd just moved to a new town and the house has a *huge* yard-"

"The fifth house," Felix whispered, like he remembered it fondly despite having never even seen it.

Hyunjin felt warmth surge through him. A smile tugged at his lips, warm and soft as he nodded but kept his head down.

"The fifth house," he affirmed before continuing.

"We moved in at the very beginning of summer and I got it in my head that I wanted to start my own garden. So I begged my mom and dad and they agreed to let me use the flower bed behind the house."

He pulled the gauze a little bit tighter, doing it slowly so it wouldn't hurt too much.

"What did you grow?" Felix asked, his voice still a little shaky but a bit clearer, eyes still watching Hyunjin's fingers work methodically around and around his tail.

"I'll give you one guess," Hyunjin said with a smirk.

There was a single beat of silence before a thin giggle, barely more than a breath, slipped from the blond. "Flowers."

It wasn't a question so Hyunjin merely nodded and kept going. "And I actually did okay! I had daisies and cone flowers and these really little white ones? I can't remember what they were called but I liked the picture on the seed packet so my mom bought them for me. Oh and I even had a rose bush!"

"Of course you did," Felix said, warmth seeping back into his voice as his eyes flickered away from Hyunjin's work to peek at his face instead. Like the sight of Hyunjin made him feel safe or something.

The brunette pulled the gauze a little tighter, needing his flimsy little makeshift splint to actually do its job and stabilize the injured tail. To hold it in place so it didn't get hurt any more than it already was.

"So…you broke your finger gardening?" Felix asked, a note of

curiosity in his voice that meant he was distracted by the story. Exactly what Hyunjin had wanted.

“Well…yes and no.” Hyunjin said with a nervous laugh. “So uh, by the time it got to be summer, the garden was in full swing. I mean like, it was busting at the seams. But see, what I hadn't considered is that where there are flowers, there are bees.”

“Bees?”

“Yeah, ya know, those evil buzzing bugs?”

“Evil? They're round and adorable!” Felix said, sounding aghast but equally delighted by the full body shudder that pulled from Hyunjin.

“Listen, I *know* they're important for like pollinating and honey and stuff and I *know* we're all supposed to be pro bee or whatever but they're *creepy!”*

Hyunjin swore he could hear the phantom buzzing inside his skull. He shivered.

“Like, why are they so *loud?* And why do they always get so fucking close to you? They have *no* concept of personal space!”

Felix giggled, the sound of a smile pressed against Hyunjin's ear even as he kept his eyes trained on adding more and more loops of gauze.

“Are you gonna tell me a cute little honeybee broke your finger?” Felix said, tone lighter than it had been all night.

“Not *directly* but…”

A moment of silence passed before Felix urged, “But?”

Hyunjin let out a long sigh. “But when one tried to buzz *into my ear* while I was working on watering my roses, it was *a bee’s* fault that I ran inside and slammed the sliding glass door on my finger.”

There was a single beat of silence, only broken by the soft sound of gauze being pulling in loop after loop before the sweetest giggle joined it. It soothed Hyunjin’s blush. Not in a way that made it less red but in a way that made him care less about it.

He kept his eyes on his work, nearly done with what was probably his seventh layer of gauze, the sound of Felix’s musical laughter lighting up his senses like pop rocks under his skin.

“Are you…are you telling me that you broke your finger because you were gardening like a little old lady and a bee scared you?” Felix’s giggle was fucking infectious but Hynjin *refused* to let his dignity go that easily. After all, he had so little left.

“It *chased* me,” He clarified, only to be met with another wave of laughter.

He tied the gauze off with a secure knot and then knotted it again, just in case. He took a deep breath and prepared himself to raise his head and look at Felix and level him some kind of sassy glare like he’d *ever* successfully delivered one in his entire life but unsurprisingly it died on his face before it ever even took shape.

Because Felix wasn’t watching his tail anymore. He wasn’t watching Hyunjin’s careful hands build layer upon layer of gauze. He wasn’t supervising the work being done to his very precious, very sensitive tail.

He was gazing at Hyunjin with warm cheeks and crescent moon eyes and a softness that the brunette would remember as long as he lived.

He looked *fond.*

Like just the very sight of Hyunjin not only made him happy but gave him *peace.*

He stared back like a deer caught in the headlights, terrified but also a little mesmerized.

The blond continued to giggle, little waves washing over him before he finally stopped, that fond gaze of his still heavy on Hyunjin’s.

After a second, Felix’s eyes flickered down, looking at Hyunjin’s handiwork.

“They’ll probably have to re-do it but I did the best I could,” Hyunjin said, his fingers twitching with the need to continue helping. To find another way to take Felix’s pain away because sure, he was laughing now but he still had dried tear tracks on his cheeks and it fucking hurt to look at.

“Thank you, Jin Jin,” Felix said quietly, his fingers brushing over the bandage with reverence, like it was some kind of gift.

Hyunjin’s brow set, determination rising in his voice like it rarely did.

“Of course, Lixie.”

The blond adjusted in his seat, swinging a leg over the bench to straddle it, facing Hyunjin, mirroring his stance. He took a deep breath before letting it out like he’d been holding it all night.

“This is *totally* going to ruin my homecoming outfit.” He said it so genuine, a truly devastated pout on his face that you’d think it actually was the biggest problem here and not, oh something silly like *broken bones.*

Hyunjin couldn’t stop the bark of a laugh that burst out of him any more than he could stop his next words. “*Please.* Cast or not, you’re still going to be the most beautiful one there.”

He bit his lip as soon as the words were out but he didn’t try to take them back. Because yeah, it was maybe a little embarrassing but it was the *truth.*

“Jin,” Felix breathed, his eyes doing this gorgeous little flutter as they fell down to his fingers, still petting the fur near the gauze before looking back up.

Hyunjin could *see* something slot into place. Perhaps it was resolution or daring or sheer recklessness but whatever it was had the blond scooting forward, his spine leaning in like he wanted to be closer.

Eyes shy but set, he bit his bottom lip and looked up through his lashes at Hyunjin. “I know I basically forced you into going to the dance with me but…I’m glad you said yes.”

Hyunjin froze. It hadn’t been what he’d been expecting. And sure, he hadn’t had *any* expectations but still. It was said so sincerely that he couldn’t even gripe about the accusation that Felix had *forced* him into anything when he’d been *pathetically* willing.

So instead, he merely said, “Yeah?”

Felix nodded, a little smile, soft as summer rain pulled at his lips. “Yeah.” He looked back down, a blush starting to rise on his cheeks. “I only wanted to go with you anyways.”

Those words, coupled with that blush and the gentle way he was leaning in, like he wanted to be closer to him…it tilted something in Hyunjin.

Maybe it was some kind of bravery finally surfacing after eighteen years lying dormant. Or perhaps it was just his self-preservation flying out the window. But regardless, he took a shaky breath and leaned in. Just a little.

“Same.”

The blond’s eyes flickered up to him, brimming with hope. “Yeah?”

Hyunjin nodded, determined not to shy away from those awestruck eyes that he didn’t deserve but would *gladly* indulge in.

“Yeah. You didn’t force me into anything.” It was important to him that Felix knew that. Like really, truly knew that. “If I’d been braver and had thought you’d say yes, I would have asked.” He whispered the words like they were a secret. Because while it was well known to him, it probably wasn’t to Felix.

“Watching everyone ask you…it was killing me.” He confessed, finally letting his eyes drop back down to his own hands, limp and useless now that they’d finished their job.

Until a soft hand slid into his. Tentative at first, slow. But sure. He watched with bated breath as small fingers slotted between his, almost like they were asking for permission.

Permission he gave by gently flexing his fingers and promising to never let go.

“Oh Jin Jin,” Felix said, his voice like warm syrup and golden sunlight. “They never stood a *chance.*”

And then there were lips on his cheek.

No mask this time. No thank you behind his teeth. Just soft, plush lips pressed heavenly soft against his heated cheek.

They were there and then they were gone but it *happened* and he knew it did because when his eyes flew up he found Felix blushing like mad and *grinning* ear to ear.

And whatever shock Hyunjin was bathed in cracked wide open, a matching smile splitting down his face alongside a stunned huff of a laugh.

He reached up, swimming with the butterflies in his stomach and

touched his own cheek. He wondered if he'd be able to feel a trace of Felix's lips still there and was almost disappointed when he couldn't.

The blond giggled, fingers tightening against his own. It felt a little bit like a miracle to have Felix laughing after the events of the evening.

"Come on," Hyunjin said, voice soft. "Let's get you home, you probably should get your tail looked at by a professional."

The blond nodded, his cheeks still a delicious pink.

Hyunjin packed everything back into the first aid kit, stashing it back where he'd found it only to have Felix's hand find his again as they walked out of the locker room.

They had to fight their way through the hovering crowd of cheerleaders and coaches that Chan and the others had been holding back. But one big bright smile from Felix seemed to assure them enough that not only was he okay enough to leave but that his parents *probably* wouldn't sue the school.

It wasn't until they reached Hyunjin's bike that he realized they were short a helmet. He glanced at Felix, wondering if Chan would let him borrow his car for a second only to find Felix digging the bulky helmet out of the gym bag he'd collected before leaving the locker room.

Hyunjin blinked, head cocked to the side. "You brought your helmet?"

Felix blinked at him, helmet in hand before rolling his eyes. "Of course! I got to be prepared in the event my knight in shining armor wants to whisk me away!"

A startled laugh bubbled out of Hyunjin, a little shocked by the comparison between *him* and a knight of any kind.

Unable to come up with a response, he simply pulled his jacket off and draped it over Felix's shivering shoulders, blushing in silence. He slid his own helmet on, straddling the bike and kicking it off the stand. Felix melted onto the back, clinging tightly like he'd been doing it all his life.

The idea of this being something normal and practiced sent a warm wave though Hyunjin's chest, waking the butterflies back up as the blond's arms wrapped around his waist tightly.

He rode to Felix's house like he was transporting precious cargo.

Which like, yeah, he was. He had to bite his lip every time they hit even the smallest bump to keep down asking Felix if he was okay.

But the blond was brave, clinging to Hyunjin and burning his face in-between his shoulder blades like it was somehow better than the night flying past them.

He pulled into the driveway and cut the ignition, letting the silence of a chilly fall evening settle back in.

Felix crawled off carefully and wrestled his helmet off. He stood beside the bike, looking down at his feet bashfully.

“So uh…I'll see you tomorrow?”

For homecoming.

In his dress, with his makeup and hair done and the opportunity to slow dance. For the dance that apparently he'd *only* wanted to go to with Hyunjin.

The brunette swallowed thickly. “Okay but, if you're in too much pain, we can skip okay? You don't need to push yourself.”

But of course Felix just rolled his eyes and leveled him a *look*. “Please. Nothing is going to get in my way of seeing you all dressed up.”

Which Hyunjin was pretty sure was supposed to be his line if he was braver and smoother. But he wasn't. So instead, he simply stared, slack jawed after the blond as he waved cutely and damn near sashayed inside.

Chapter End Notes

> Do you know what's next?? IT'S HOMECOMING BABYYYY!!! I'll see you on Thursday!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> HAPPY FREAKING THURSDAY EVERYONE!!! I don't know about you but this week has felt endless...but here we are! Ready for homecoming?? LET'S GOOOOO!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hyunjin fought the urge to straighten his tie for the seventh time. He'd already patted down his hair more times than he could count, checking it in the rearview mirror of the car he'd borrowed from his parents. He'd checked his breath like he'd be doing anything with this mouth tonight and had switched the bouquet of flowers he'd brought from his left to right hand dozens of times like it *fucking mattered.*

He shifted anxiously on his feet, almost certain that Ara was watching his loitering from behind the curtains and still unable to pull himself from his little spiral.

And it wasn't even necessarily a *bad* spiral. He'd had *way* worse. But this one was *new* because it was tinged with something like a fizzy excitement that had his fingertips tingling. He felt a little swell of hope trying to take shape under his ribs and tentatively succeeding.

He'd been *dreaming* of this moment for weeks now. And those weeks sort of felt like a lifetime, which yes, was dramatic. But in a lot of ways, Hyunjin had been waiting for this moment all his life; the moment where he'd pick up the man of his dreams on what was really starting to resemble a real live date.

He took one last steadying breath and glanced at the wristwatch his dad had let him borrow. If he stood here in the cold any longer, he'd be late and he *refused* to start the night off by breaking his promise of '6 pm sharp'.

He walked up the front steps with stiff knees, stopping in front of the door like it was the portal to another universe.

He raised a nervous fist and knocked; once, twice, thrice before taking a step back and waiting as patiently as he could with his heart trying to escape from his chest.

He heard the sound of rustling *immediately* in what he could only imagine was actually Ara untangling herself from the curtains she'd been creeping behind.

"Lixie! It's show time!" She screeched, oblivious to the fact that her house was definitely *not* soundproofed.

"I'll get the camera!" Gang-min called, thudding footsteps *racing* away from the door into some distant room, his faint voice yelling back, "Upstairs now, mister!"

"I'm going, I'm going!" Felix cried, his voice disappearing up the stairs.

Hyunjin bit his lip, the chaos behind the door soothing something inside. Like maybe he wasn't the only one completely amped up about this. Maybe he wasn't completely ridiculous for obsessing over which way he should lace his new shoes. *Or* maybe he was but maybe it didn't matter all that much if Felix's entire household was *also* on high alert like this whole thing was a precious operation they couldn't risk losing.

"Lixie! Shoes!" Ara's voice hissed, followed by the sound of a grunt and what was presumably a poor throw that resulted in a heel hitting the wall.

"Jesus, woman! Are you trying to kill me?" Felix cried, voice far off and shrill like he'd only narrowly escaped death.

"It was an accident!"

"It was attempted *murder!"*

"Son," Gang-min's tired voice sighed from somewhere close to the front door. "It would be *manslaughter,* and can we please continue this conversation later? Your date is waiting."

The commotion behind the door went silent, almost like it does right before the curtain rose on a play.

Hyunjin took it as his queue too, trying to stifle his giggles and rolling his shoulders back as the door finally swung open to reveal a beaming Gang-min with Ara hovering behind him.

"Hyunjin!" He cried, reaching out to shake his hand a little too enthusiastically. "Just on time."

“A true gentleman,” Ara agreed, her smile doing that thing that Felix’s did sometimes where it verged a little too on the feral side to be comforting.

Hyunjin felt a blush rise to his cheeks as he ducked his head and was ushered inside. He crossed the threshold, eyes immediately scanning for a little blond in a moody red dress. But he spotted the little scuff near the banister that was probably from the near fatal heel throw and had to bite his lip again.

That excitement was bubbling up inside him again. He wanted to *see* him. All done up and glorious. He wanted to watch him float down the stairs and smile at him like he was the only thing in the foyer as Gang-min snapped picture after candid picture.

“Felix! Hyunjin is here!” Ara called, taking pity on his poor, impatient soul.

And the blond didn’t even *pretend* to take his time. He didn’t call out from his room that he’d be down in a minute. He didn’t say anything about needing to finish his hair, there was no chaotic race to the finish line like he hadn’t allotted enough time to properly get ready.

He simply peeked from around the corner, making it painfully obvious that he’d been eagerly waiting just out of sight this whole time. The tips of his ears appeared first before his big brown eyes followed. Fingers clenched around the wall like he was holding himself in place so he didn’t dart forward and run down the stairs.

It didn’t work.

“Jin Jin,” he gasped, popping out from behind his cover like *he* was the one stunned by his date and not the other way around.

Because Hyunjin wasn’t even sure if he was breathing anymore.

He’d seen Felix with bright red lips and sassy pigtails before. He’d seen him in five inch heels and mini skirts. He’d seen him damn near strut down the hallway at school like it was a runway and he *owned* it.

But this hit different because if felt like Felix had looked in the mirror and said to himself, ‘what would really take Hyunjin’s breath away?’ and then done *exactly* that.

His dress skimmed his frame just as beautifully as before but the little details were what really made it pop. His heels weren’t terribly tall

and they weren't the chunky platforms the blond normally favored. They were more subtle. Strappy and black and minimal. His hair was a mess of curls piled on top of his head, probably housing at *least* a hundred pins to keep it all in place. Whisper thin spirals fell out around his face, around his ears, haloing him in this soft, almost windswept look. His kitten ears peaked out, little sparkly clips nestled at the base of each one like he wanted them to stand out.

But it was his face that stole the show. He must have skipped the foundation or opted for something much lighter because his face was a *mess* of winter weakened freckles. They stole the breath right out of Hyunjin's lungs. Because he *knew* that Felix was self conscious about them but he'd told them he liked them. He'd told them they were beautiful and the blond had heard him and remembered and now here he was, at the top of the stairs, smiling down at Hyunjin like he'd hung the fucking stars himself.

They stood, locked in each other's gazes for what felt like an eternity, separated by nothing but a carpeted staircase and heart stuttering awe.

"Lix," Hyunjin finally breathed out, not sure where to even *start*.

But his voice seemed to pull Felix out of his trance. His freckled face broke into a broad grin as he started to barrel down the stairs. It wasn't the slow, romantic descent Hyunjin had imagined. It was so much better. It was *Felix*.

"Jin Jin!" He cried, *running* down the stairs like a broken tail wasn't enough for him and *slammed* into Hyunjin's chest, arms wrapping around his waist like all he wanted to do was feel his body, solid and real, underneath his hands.

The weight of it - both physical and emotional - pushed the air from Hyunjin's lungs as he stumbled back a step. It took him a dumbfounded moment but he let out a disbelieving laugh and wrapped his arms around Felix's shoulders.

"You look so pretty," Felix whispered into his shirt, arms tightening.

Hyunjin's stomach did a fucking backflip. "That's my line," He muttered back.

Felix giggled into his chest before finally unburying his face. He looked up at Hyunjin with shining eyes that had Hyunjin's hand moving before he could even think.

He carefully threaded his fingers into the soft curls piled on top of his head and scratched around those pretty little clips before giving his ear a gentle little pinch that made the blonde blush.

Ara *cooed* behind them, reminding Hyunjin that they indeed were *not* alone. Reluctantly and with a bright red face, he took a step back and glanced at the Lees.

Felix's mom had a bright smile in place, hands clasped to the side of her face like she was truly delighted to see such softness between them. And Gang-min? He was taking his job as photographer *very* seriously. He peaked out from behind the camera - because bless him, he was taking photos with an actual camera instead of his phone - and nodded toward the flowers still clutched in Hyunjin's sweaty palm.

"Oh, r-right!" He stuttered, lifting the flowers up between them like he'd forgotten them entirely. Which, to be honest, he sort of had. "I uh, I got these. For you."

Felix's eyes went *wide,* like he truly hadn't noticed them. "Really?" He breathed.

And Hyunjin couldn't help the little laugh that shot out of him, the excited nervousness bubbling over. "No. They're for your dad."

Felix blinked once, like for a second he honestly believed it before he leveled Hyunjin with an unimpressed look that was ruined by his soft pink blush and the little smile tugging at his lips. He shoved Hyunjin's shoulder playfully even as his eyes fell down to the flowers.

Hyunjin laughed. "Yes, Lix. Really." he said needlessly, pushing the bouquet forward a little more.

The blond accepted them, almost shyly. "Daisies and roses." He muttered, eyes so soft as he took them in.

"It felt appropriate." Hyunjin said, fighting the urge to shove his hands into his pockets and shrug.

"It's perfect," Felix affirmed, finally looking up to smile at Hyunjin with another one of those heart melting smiles.

But before they could slip into another one of their non-verbal staring contests, Gang-Min asked to take some more pictures, guiding them through poses. He was adjusting lighting and getting angles and moving them around the house to different locations in a way that

had Hyunjin almost certain that he'd scouted out the most photogenic locations in the house beforehand.

At one point, finally back in front of the stairs, standing at the base with a gentle hand hovering just over Felix's lower back and smiling for the camera, he caught sight of Felix's tail.

It was re-wrapped with a pristine white bandage and held together with tight little tension clips. It was a much more professional version of what Hyunjin had attempted.

The blond noticed his line of sight and carefully pulled his tail around for a better look.

"Doctor said it was just a fracture. Still hurts a little bit but it shouldn't take as long to heal as a full break." Ara said, her excitement a little dulled by the topic.

Hyunjin nodded. "I guess that's good then."

"Thank you again, Hyunjin. For patching him up and getting him home last night." Gang-Min said with such resounding sincerity that it almost made Hyunjin squirm.

Last night, when he'd dropped Felix off, he'd walked him to the door because that's what you were supposed to do when you delivered a friend home broken, right? Felix's parents had been delighted to see Hyunjin at first, before they'd noticed the dried tears on Felix's face and the shaky way he was cradling his tail like it was precious treasure.

They'd been the cliche of anxious parents, running around and shoving shoes on and desperate to get their little angel to the nearest hospital for an x-ray. And Hyunjin had just stood off to the side, waiting for a dismissal.

But what he'd received instead was a teary eyed hug from Ara and a fervent '*thank you for taking care of him'.* He'd received a clap on the shoulder from Gang-Min that spoke volumes even though all he said was "I really like this one," to a small Felix.

So he merely nodded, still feeling the heavy weight of their gratitude from the night before and simply said, "Of course."

He looked away from Felix's parents to see the blond himself scowling at the bandages like they were personally insulting him.

“Ruins the whole look,” Felix mumbled.

And Hyunjin? Well, he’d come prepared.

“It doesn’t ruin anything,” he assured the blond before reaching into his pocket and pulling forth not one but *four* different ribbon options. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t spruce it up a little.”

He knelt down on one knee and started comparing the ribbons he’d brought to the dress, wanting to have the most seamless match possible.

Felix was staring down at him, eyes wide and nearly disbelieving. “I… what?” He giggled like he simply couldn't believe it.

Satisfied with the third option, Hyunjin slowly started to wrap it over the bright white bandage, bathing it in that same moody red to match his dress.

“I got really into the art of gift wrapping a couple years ago,” Hyunjin said offhandedly. “I had a lot of left over ribbon.”

The entire room chuckled at that but it was Felix who whispered, “Of course you did.” like it was the cutest thing he’d ever heard.

And hey, maybe that’s why Felix was his soulmate; he thought it was cute how Hyunjin hoarded craft supplies and hyperfocused on things like scrapbooking and learning textile crafts.

It didn’t take long to cover the whole thing in ribbon and tie it off with a little bow. He stood up, shoving the rejected options back into his pockets and smiled down at the blond who was damn near glowing.

Felix took a deep breath, holding eye contact before he melted back into Hyunjin’s side and looked to his dad. “Okay, just a few more pictures. With the ribbon this time.”

So they snapped more photos, Hyunjin feeling like his entire body was on fire with the delicate way Felix stood next to him, arms around him like he fucking mattered. Like he felt the same way about Hyunjin; something delicate and insatiable and special.

They were finally released with a reminder of the midnight curfew and promised to have fun and be safe. When the door finally clicked shut behind them, it left the quiet of early evening and the glow of

Felix’s curls in the porch light.

Like a moth, Hyunjin felt himself floating forward. His fingers teased the little clips at the base of his fluffy ears before gently rubbing his thumb up the shell of it.

“Hi,” Felix said shyly, leaning into his hand.

“Hey,” Hyunjin said.

There it was, that giddy excitement, building up between them like it was something they could share.

They giggled for no reason before Hyunjin finally pulled his hand away and gestured towards the car.

He opened the door, because he'd promised his mom he'd be a perfect gentleman tonight. He raced around the hood of the car to slide behind the driver's seat and slowly backed out of the driveway and into the street.

“How come we didn't take your bike?” Felix asked.

Hyunjin snorted. “And ruin your hair with a helmet? No way.”

The blond hummed happily, his hand laying gently over Hyunjin's on the gear shift. “So thoughtful.” He said quietly as he watched the world pass outside his window.

The silence wasn't awkward. Instead it almost felt like a private moment of peace before the dance. Like something for just them.

The parking lot was already packed by the time they got there, forcing Hyunjin to circle the lot once before giving up and parking at the back of the lot.

He escorted Felix toward the front of the school, even going so far as to offer him his arm and then nearly dying when the blond actually accepted and looped his arm through the crook of his elbow.

They strolled slowly toward the front of the school only to find a small crowd lingering at the base of the steps.

Felix's ears twitched and Hyunjin's brow raised. They shared a look, curiosity rising in the way that they both loved a spot of drama when it had nothing to do with them.

In the next blink, they were moving forward, slicing through the crowd only to find that this spot of drama? Oh it had *everything* to do with them.

Because there was Chan, his fists clenched and his mouth set in a frown as he stared down no other than fucking Ho-Jin.

“Get out,” Chan's voice was steely in a way Hyunjin had never heard before. “You're not welcome here.”

Ho-Jin snorted and had the audacity (or stupidity, Hyunjin didn't know yet) to cross his arms over his chest. “Not welcome? I *go* here. All students are welcome at homecoming.”

“Not ones who drop their teammates on the *fucking* ground because they can't handle a little rejection.”

Ho-Jin’s smug look flattened into something mean. “It wasn't *little,”* he muttered.

But Chan scoffed and cut him off. “Yeah and who's fault was that? Hijacking the mic and making a spectacle of the whole thing was *all* you, genius.”

Ho-Jin’s jaw clenched, rage starting to shake through his arms.

But Chan either didn't notice or simply didn't care because he took a step forward. His whole body was tense like he was barely holding back.

“*You* decided to do the whole grand gesture thing and guess what? It didn't work. That doesn't mean you get to *hurt* someone because they said *no.”*

Ho-Jin was seething in his cheap suit, his fists clenched tight like he was going to use them and it had Felix gripping Hyunjin's arm even tighter, fear leaking into his fingers.

“Well he wasn't *supposed* to say *no,”* Ho-Jin muttered so quietly Hyunjin almost didn't hear it.

But he did. Oh he fucking did.

How dare he pretend that he had any kind of right over the things Felix did or didn't do?

Why did he walk around like the rules didn't apply to him? Was it

arrogance or plain stupidity?

And why didn't the first hundred no's from Felix sink in?

One foot after another, arm drawing back in a way it never had before, Hyunjin cut through the rest of the crowd to land a punch straight to Ho-Jin's jaw.

He felt his knuckles split, he *heard* the crack but it took a second for his brain to catch up to the fact that he'd actually punched someone. In the face. *Hard.*

And it fucking *hurt.*

"*Shit,"* Hyunjin hissed, shaking his hand out like he could get the sting to fly off that way.

Ho-Jin was gripping his jaw, eyes wide with surprise and something like indignation. Like he couldn't *believe* a low life like him would dare lay a hand on him.

"What the *fuck?!"* He screamed, eyes roving over Hyunjin. "Where the fuck did you come from?"

Hyunjin didn't answer, he just glared back, suddenly so glad he was in a leather jacket and not some stuffy suit coat. This made him feel borderline invincible. Like a security blanket that allowed him to pretend he actually was as intimidating as people liked to think.

Ho-Jin whirled around towards an alarming calm Chan. "You're seriously just going to let him do that?"

But Chan merely crossed his arms over his chest like that matter was already settled. "As far as I can tell, it was outside of school hours and off school property." He shrugged. "Not my jurisdiction."

It was probably a lie. The steps probably counted as school property. But Ho-Jin could tell by the snickers coming from the crowd of onlookers that he wasn't going to win the popular vote on this one.

"Fuck this," he muttered, already turning to leave with his tail between his legs. But he paused, eyes finding Felix with his rage barely concealed. "And fuck *you.*"

Hyunjin took a single step forward, ready and willing to throw another punch and fully break his hand if needed when Felix

interpreted.

He let out the sassiest sigh on the planet, rolled his eyes and propped his hands in his hips. “Ew, no thanks. Seriously, how many times are you going to make me turn you down?”

A wave of laughter swept through the crowd, making Ho-Jin’s face burn. He muttered something under his breath and stormed off, stomping his feet like it fucking mattered.

Hyunjin let out a long breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding as Chan cleared his throat and amiably told everyone the show was over.

As everyone began to scatter, muttering and murmuring and cutting a *wide* berth around Hyunjin with more dodgy glances and worried whispers, the tall brunette felt feather light fingers thread through his so carefully he almost thought he'd dreamed it.

But nope. There was Felix, who was somehow actually real and petting Hyunjin's angry knuckles with worried eyes.

“Does it hurt?” He asked, lips pulled into a little frown that was absolutely *not* allowed tonight.

So Hyunjin shrugged. “I mean, yeah. But it was worth it.”

And he meant it. He really, *really* meant it. Because *Felix* was worth it.

The blond glanced up at him from under his lashes, looking like he was holding in some kind of warm, soft secret just behind his lips.

But Hyunjin didn’t get to ask what it was because Chan came over with a tired look that was trying to remain firm.

“As your student class president, I have to ask you to not make a habit of punching other students, even if they totally deserve it. But as your friend?” His smile bloomed, a little tired but a lot grateful. “That was fucking awesome.”

Hyunjin ducked his head, feeling a blush color his cheeks as Felix joined in.

“Super cool! He moved so fast! I didn’t even realize he’d moved forward until *bam!* Ho-Jin was on the ground crying like a baby!”

“Okay, that’s a bit of an exaggeration.” Hyunjin mumbled, still looking down at his shoes even as Felix tightened his grip on his fingers.

A sharp twinge raced up his knuckles, pulling a wince and a hiss from him that had the blond trying to let go. But Hyunjin held on because sore or not, he really didn't want to let go. Not yet. Not ever, really. But perhaps that was dramatic.

"Come on, let's get you inside and get some ice on that hand." Chan said, motioning for them to follow him.

They waited in line, turning in tickets for entry to the gymnasium they typically sweat in for free. It was still the same old gym with creaky wooden floor and uncomfortably high ceilings but Hyunjin had to admit, all of Chan's party planning had really done wonders.

The dingy cinderblock walls were hidden behind large swathes of draped burgundy fabric. Long tables had been set up at one end with snacks and the traditional plastic bowls that were meant to look like cut crystal holding what would *definitely* become spiked punch by the end of the night. Large round tables took up nearly half the gym, covered by crushed velvet tablecloths that would be ruined by the end of the night. There were centerpieces made of pink roses and white babies' breath. Big bows tied on the back of the cheap plastic chairs that circled each table and a portion left bare for dancing where the awkward first entries of the night were trying (and failing) to get the party started. Even the DJ they'd hired from the local radio station looked sleepy as he half heartedly bopped to some top twenty pop.

It was a little depressing with its budget decor and steely eyed chaperones roaming the perimeters but it was *exactly* what Hyunjin had always imagined a high school dance to look like.

It was *perfect.*

"Quick! The punch is the good kind with sherbert in it! We need to get some before they ruin it with gross liquor!" And Felix was off like a shot, Jisung suddenly materializing out of thin air and racing toward the punch bowl with him.

Hyunjin blinked, feeling equal parts shocked and not at the same time.

Minho siddled up beside him, dressed in a crisp, classic suit. He chuckled as they watched their dates across the room, filling *several* cups and stocking up for the night on un-tainted punch.

"Lookin' good, Jin." He said, nudging his shoulder with his own before his eyes caught the way the taller man was cradling a hand like it was a scared little bird. "What's wrong with your hand?"

“Punched Ho-Jin,” he said simply with a shrug. He never would have imagined saying something so violent so casually but here he was, much more invested in watching Felix try to plan the logistics of carrying several cups of punch back across the gymnasium.

Minho’s laugh sounded like it had been punched out of him as we swung wide, borderline *proud* eyes over to the other brunette. But something settled in his eyes after a second, something like ‘*of course you did’* and he merely shook his head and resumed watching their dates across the room.

“Good.” He said simply, enjoying the show as Felix and Jisung slowly crawled back across the room, each with nearly ten cups balanced precariously in their hands, on their arms and even held by *teeth.*

They chose a table and dumped their bounty onto it and as soon as Jisung's hands were free, he was racing up to Hyunjin with wide, chaotic eyes.

“Did you really punch Ho-Jin into the next century?”

Hyunjin blushed, “I mean, I don’t know about-”

“He *totally* did!” Felix said, appearing behind Jisung with a wide smile and sparkling eyes. He looked at Hyunjin like he was truly his hero and it had the taller boy blushing, desperate to duck his head and deny the whole thing.

But the swelling in his knuckles wouldn’t make that very easy. The throbbing was starting to get a little harder to ignore, especially as the rush of adrenaline that came with throwing the first fist of your life gave you.

Thankfully, like the overfunctioning saint he was, Chan reappeared with a small paper bowl filled with crushed ice.

“Sorry, I couldn't find a bag to put it in but I figured this would work.”

Hyunjin nodded and thanked him. He was sat at the table and given strict instructions to ice his hand and guard the punch with his *life* while the rest of them got food for the table.

Nearly ten minutes passed before they returned with heaping plates of slightly cold, congealed pasta and leafy salads with too much dressing and an *entire* basket of rolls that Felix proudly set in front of Hyunjin, saying, *‘I know how much you like flour’.*

And goddammit if he hadn't already been in love, that would have done it.

He couldn't feel his hand anymore as he pulled it from the icy water like a dead fish. But it turned out, he didn't even *need* a hand because Felix was fussing over him like it was an olympic sport and he was going for gold.

"Lix, you don't have to do that," Hyunjin said as the blond tore a piece off a steaming roll and held it up to him.

But Felix looked up at him bashfully, batting his eyes and said, "I know. But I *want* to."

And that was all Hyunjin needed to hear. If Felix *wanted* this? Then who was he to take that from him?

So he ate bite after bite directly from Felix's fingers and fork, feeling like a goddamn king in the making. All the while, the blond was repeating the story of Hyunjin heroics (as he'd dubbed it) to anyone who would listen.

By the time Jeongin showed up, late and stressed, the rumor had already spread through the grapevine. He'd simply walked up to the table, grin in place as he said, "So you punched Ho-Jin."

Not a question, simply a statement said with an evil little smile.

And before Hyunjin could even *try* to tell the accurate version of events, Felix was off! This time the legend he spun included a scene where Hyunjin challenged Ho-Jin to a *duel* and took mercy on him when Ho-Jin started crying.

"Okay, okay, Lixie, calm down," Hyunjin laughed around a forkful of lukewarm spaghetti. His cheeks were as red as the watery sauce. "It wasn't like that and you know it."

The blond giggled and rolled his eyes like in some level he disagreed or thought Hyunjin's denial was cute and humble instead of actual facts.

"Okay *fine,*" Felix said with a giggle, taking a bite off the same fork he'd been using to feed Hyunjin and short circuiting his brain.

"But it *felt* like that." the blond added, cheeks taking in a pink glow as he stabbed a meatball and twirled it in the sauce. "So…chivalrous and

brave.” He smiled, almost to himself before sharing it with Hyunjin. “You were so cool, Jin Jin.”

But before Hyunjin could assure him he really, time wasn't, Minho came in with the assist.

“Aw,” he cooed in monotone. “ Well, there's a first time for everything.”

Felix scoffed but Hyunjin found himself nodding in agreement far too easily while the rest of the table laughed.

“But if you're done fawning over your hero, I'd like to take my boyfriend out on the dance floor.”

“*Boyfriend?!”* Jisung screeched, pointing to himself in absolute disbelief like he was expecting Minho to say *‘No, not you!’*

But instead, Minho leveled him the world's most unimpressed look and deadpanned, “You're joking, right?”

Jisung was flustered in a way Hyunjin had never expected him to be capable of. The normally happy go lucky, go with the flow, unflappable Jisung was…well, *flapped.*

“I-I mean, yeah b-but you've never - *we've* never - used that word and I just…wow. I…yeah, wow.”

Minho rolled his eyes before the edge of something scared and insecure snuck in on the fringes. “Is that okay?”

Jisung was nodding instantly, up and down, over and over and over in a way that made even *Hyunjin* feel dizzy.

Minho laughed, reaching out to grab his chin with his thumb and forefinger to still the motion.

“Good.” He said simply before standing and holding out his hand like a true gentleman. Total pride and prejudice vibes, if you asked Hyunjin.

“So will you dance with me?”

Jisung was up in a flash, greedily threading their fingers together and allowing himself to be hauled off.

Chan watched them disappear into the awkward crowd of swaying

teenagers with a look of pure pride on his face.

Seungmin rose, stretching his arms high above his head like he'd just woken up. "Welp, I guess this is my queue to ruin their moment." And with that, he strolled casually out onto the floor, hands lazily placed in pockets like he wasn't a lurking chaos gremlin.

Chan shot up, already sighing like he was exhausted. Hyunjin desperately hoped that he'd get a full 24 hours of sleep after all of this.

"Seungminnie! Leave them alone!" He called after him, hurriedly pushing his chair in and racing after him.

Jeongin gave a long sigh and stood begrudgingly, like every joint in his body hurt. "I guess I'll go play mediator. Will you two be okay?" He glanced down at them for a single beat as Felix carefully offered Hyunjin a bite of pasta, hand cupped underneath to catch any stray drips of sauce.

Jeongin scoffed. "What am I saying? You're both in heaven right now."

Felix rolled his eyes even as a traitorous blush rose to his cheeks. "We'll meet you out there when we're finished eating."

Jeongin nodded and walked away, leaving them alone at the table.

Hyunjin looked down to the almost empty plates between him and Felix. Nearly all of the punch had been drank already, the blond vibrating next to him at the sheer sugar rush.

"Aren't we almost done eating?" He asked.

But Felix looked up at him, blinking once before he placed a hand over Hyunjin's non-submerged one. "Oh my sweet summer child, not even close?"

Trying very hard not to spontaneously combust at the soft contact on the back of his hand, Hyunjin raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Felix simply nodded and shoved away their messy plates like he was making room to unroll the blueprints of a museum and finally reveal his plan for the ultimate heist. He sunk lower to the table like he was afraid someone else would hear.

“Chan said that by 8 pm, they would start cleaning up the buffet. And once that was done? Dessert.”

He glanced across the gym to the small team of teachers and students who’d been tasked with cleaning up. The large trays of pasta had been collected and probably stored back in the cafeteria. Someone was trying to shoo crumbs off the tablecloth and looking like it was slowly destroying their sanity.

“I have it on good authority that the dessert is being kept in the kitchens until they bring it out.”

“Good authority?”

Felix nodded. “Chan and common sense.” He said simply, eyes flicking back over his shoulder to monitor the clean up. He turned back to Hyunjin with fire in his eyes. “And guess what’s for dessert, Jin Jin?”

He knew that look. He knew the only thing that could put that fire into the blond’s eyes. The kind of crazed devotion that would bring him to fist fights and had him resorting to *biting* one of his best friends.

“Cake.” He answered solemnly.

The fire intensified. “Even better. Cupcakes. With *sprinkles.”*

The blond leaned in, his fingers gripping the edge of the table like he was barely holding himself still. “And *we’re* going to get the first pick.”

Hyunjin snuck his own glance over to the table, still being meticulously cleaned of crumbs. It was a long table and there were currently two students carefully, slowly trying to move a punch bowl that was still terrifyingly full.

They had time, but probably not much.

“Let’s go,” Hyunjin said simply. He pulled his hand from its ice bath and dabbed it dry with the last clean napkin on the table. He rose, trying his best to look casual as he fixed his jacket and offered Felix his elbow. Sure, they might be breaking one rule but it didn’t mean he couldn't still be a gentleman.

The blond preened, standing up and dusting off his dress for no other reason than to appear unhurried and unbothered. He took Hyunjin’s arm without a second thought and allowed him to calmly maneuver

them towards the gym doors.

With one last check over his shoulders, he carefully shouldered the door open just enough for the two of them to slip through and out into the quiet, dark hallway.

They froze for a few moments, straining their ears for anything that sounded like the footsteps of a patrolling teacher or perhaps the giggling of other wandering students. But the halls were eerily silent in a way they never were.

Felix slowly turned his head up to look at Hyunjin. A slow smile stretching at his lips. “Come on,” He urged, taking a step. “Let’s go!”

He grabbed Hyunjin’s uninjured hand, twisting their fingers together and took off.

His heels clicked gleefully on the tiled floors, giggles peeling out of him as they rounded the first corner. Hyunjin’s dress shoes slid across the waxed floors but he managed to stay upright, racing alongside Felix as his own laughter started to fill the halls.

They tried to keep it quiet, shushing one another half-heartedly in ways that only caused more giggles.

Hyunjin, despite all the rumors, despite how he looked on the outside and all the assumptions people made of him, didn’t make a habit of breaking rules. He’d tried his best to keep his head down, counting the days until high school would end. Until he’d graduate into the real world and probably continue to be some quiet loner that didn’t know how to make friends.

But here he was, at the complete and utter mercy of a sparkling blond who giggled like a mad man on a mission to steal *cupcakes* from the cafeteria before anyone else got to them.

It was silly and ridiculous and maybe a tiny bit reckless but *god,* for *once* he felt his age. He felt young and stupid and so deliriously happy as they slid around another corner, hand in hand.

He felt like in these dark, barren halls, he and Felix must look like shooting stars. Bright and happy and hopeful and he knew he’d never be able to do that on his own. Felix made him shine. Even just a little, maybe just through osmosis but still. It was magic.

Felix was magic.

The doors to the cafeteria finally appeared around the final bend and Felix whisper- yelled, “Jin Jin! We’re almost there!”

“Come on, come on, come on!” He urged giddily, tugging the blond after him and almost wondering if he should just offer to carry him the rest of the way. But before he could act on that question, they were shoving open the cafeteria doors and racing toward the kitchens in the back.

It had been in this room that he’d seen Felix for the first time. Nervous and sitting with a bunch of over-friendly peers, overthinking and second guessing every single thought he had, every stuttered word he uttered, he’d appeared. Bright and shining in his cheer uniform, skirt swishing and eyes sparkling like he deserved it. He’d remembered the way the world had stopped around him, the sound dimming like nature did before a storm.

He’d been hooked from the very beginning. Love at first sight.

And now he was now racing past the very table he’d sat at consistently for months now, the same table where Minho had agreed to tutor him and where he’d plucked up all his courage to offer to tutor Jeongin. The same table where Chan had officially invited him to his first sleepover and the same table where Minho and Jisung had *finally* kissed.

The same table where he felt like he actually *belonged.* Hand in hand with the boy he was crazy about, on a mission to eat enough sugar to down an elephant.

Life had never been more strange or more wonderful.

They slid through the last set of doors like they’d just hit home base and *froze.* Because there, out in the open, ripe for the taking were rows upon rows of cupcakes. Neatly placed on large metal sheet pans and ready to be painstakingly carried across the school toward the dance.

They stood in mild shock, chest heaving as they caught their breath.

“Do you think this is what heaven is like?” Felix finally asked, eyes fucking shining in the weak moonlight that spilled through the windows.

And Hyunjin wanted to make some joke about how he dearly hoped heaven looked nothing like a high school but he glanced at the sea of

pretty little cupcakes and the way the silvery moonlight played with Felix's freckles and he felt the warmth of where Felix was *still* holding his hand and simply said, "I hope so."

The blond beamed up at him before tugging him forward again, his voice dropping to a low, rumbly whisper. "We need to move fast; they'll be here to pick them up any minute now."

Hyunjin nodded and stepped forward, surveying the bounty before them. "What flavor?"

"Hmm," Felix pondered, crouching low to get eye level like them. "One of each. Just to make sure."

Make sure of what, Hyunjin wasn't entirely sure but he still nodded like it was a solid plan. He reached out and plucked a chocolate cupcake out of the line and handed it to Felix. He then carefully scooted each cupcake in the row over just enough to hide the fact that one was missing.

He repeated the process, grabbing a vanilla cupcake for himself, knowing full well that Felix would glare him into the next century if he didn't participate in their oddly wholesome little act of rebellion.

He turned back around to find Felix gazing up at him. He smiled as he stuck his finger in the frosting and popped it in his mouth, eyes lighting up.

"Oh my god, Jin Jin, you have to try! They might even be better than mine."

"Impossible," Hyunjin said immediately. But then his brain caught up with the fact that Felix was holding a cupcake out to him, eyes expectant. And yeah, the blond had been feeding him all night but perhaps it was the change in scenery. The fact that they were alone, in a place they shouldn't be, stealing confectionary treats like they were contraband.

"Come on," Felix urged, stepping closer. "Try it."

Hyunjin watched as his little tongue poked out of the side, looking for leftover frosting.

He wondered what it would taste like on his lips.

He shook his head, feeling a blush flood his face as he took a shaky

step forward. He raised his own cupcake, because if he didn't do something with his hands, he might do something crazy like grab Felix and never let him go.

"Okay but…you got to try the vanilla too." It was a stupid bargain that made no sense besides the fact that he needed to distract himself from the crazy thoughts that followed that little tongue over petal pink lips.

Felix blinked once, a matching blush flushing his cheeks as he nodded with a shy smile. He took another micro step forward, bringing him into Hyunjin's orbit as he raised the cupcake.

Easy as breathing, Felix popped up on his toes and sank his teeth in. He giggled around the sugar, a bit of icing ending up on his nose as his ears twitched happily. And for once, Hyunjin just wanted that carefree feeling to continue. He wanted to stop standing in his own way.

Following Felix's lead, he leaned forward, having the bend at the knees a little to take a bite of his own.

He smiled, the sugar making his blood rush even faster. He hummed, chewing. "S'good," He said behind his hand.

The blond giggled, bouncing on his toes as he took a bite directly from where Hyunjin had. At this point in the night, they'd shared so much food and utensils, they'd essentially had a full on second hand make out session.

"What other flavors do we have?" Hyunjin asked curiously, trying desperately not to just stare at the other boy's lips.

So they crouched low, examining the other trays of cupcakes. They found a tray of strawberry that nearly had Felix doing a victory dance and a tray of green ones that even after *two* whole cupcakes, they couldn't decide if it was supposed to be matcha or pistachio. According to Felix, it was giving 'swamp moss'.

"I don't know," Hyunjin hummed, still feeling the gritty earthyness of it in his mouth. "I'm getting hints of wasabi."

Felix made gagging noises before the devolved into another fit of giggles. Clutching at stomachs, they hovered close like their laughter was a secret only to be shared between them. Felix's hand landed on his arm as he giggled again. "Do you think they'd notice if I took one

more strawberry?"

"Lixie," Hyunjin said, moving forward before he could second guess himself. He reached up to scratch blunt nails at the base of his ears. "Don't be greedy."

"Just one more, Jin Jin?" Felix pleaded, stumbling forward until they were nearly chest to chest. His head was titled back, bottom lip pouting out in a pitiful manner.

"Pleeeeassse,"

Hyunjin swallowed thickly, his defenses already crumbling. "God, that look should be illegal."

"Add it to my wrap sheet."

"Cupcake thief and -"

"Cupcake thief *extraordinaire,* Jin Jin."

The brunette hummed thoughtfully, barely keeping his smile in check. "Aw yes, *extraordinaire."*

Felix shuffled forward, hand still gripping Hyunjin's arm like he was afraid he'd move away. They melted into each other, some invisible string pulling them both in. "And?"

Hyunjin cocked his head, suddenly unable to remember what he'd been saying because wow, Felix's lips were so close. And there was still a little frosting in the corner. And god, he *ached* to fix it.

"And?" He said dumbly, sounding dazed.

"You said I'm a cupcake thief extraordinaire *and…*?"

Oh yeah, there had been more to that, hadn't there. But Hyunjin's brain wasn't working very well. Because the closer Felix drifted, the more convinced he became that strawberry frosting would taste better from the blond's lips.

"And…" He mumbled, eyes transfixed on Felix's shining face and his devilish little grin. "A-and just…criminally cute."

He felt his blush flood his entire body; head to toe. It was one of the stupidest things he'd ever said but Felix didn't seem to mind. Instead, he bit his bottom lip like he was trying to contain the wide smile that

was taking over his face.

He had absolutely *no* game and yet here Felix was, looking up at him from under his lashes like he was still somehow impressed.

“Oh my *god,* whoever decided to do *velvet* tablecloths is now public enemy number one.”

Hyunjin froze, the warmth in the air between them evaporating immediately as the doors to the cafeteria banged open and the click of heels echoed toward the kitchen.

Felix’s eyes went wide before he grabbed Hyunjin’s hand, yanking him deeper into the kitchen. “We have to hide!” He hissed, keeping his voice to a frantic whisper as he eyed *terrible* hiding spots like empty open shelving and behind a two foot tall bag of rice that rested on the floor.

The second the blond’s eyes landed on the fucking deep freeze, Hyunjin took control. There was no way in *hell* he was going to die in the high school’s freezer, even if it was in the arms of an angel.

“This way!” He whispered, yanking Felix toward the bank of refrigerators humming in the corner. There were three lined up side by side but the last one didn’t sit flush against the wall. It was tight but they would survive a couple of minutes crammed in there until they could make their escape safely.

Or so he thought.

But the second he wedged his body in there, he realized how little space there really was. If he pulled Felix in after him, he’d be smothered by his cheap perfume and overall proximity. But there was not time for a plan B or a pivot. The footsteps and whines of their classmates were getting closer and he didn’t want to get caught red handed.

So he pulled Felix in, the blond pinned between him and the refrigerator, chest to chest.

“Calm down, it wasn’t *that* bad,” another voice said, weary with exhaustion.

But Hyunjin could *hear* the eye roll in the answering voice from earlier. “We should have just *burned it.* Would have taken less time.”

Felix bit his lip, trying to stifle his giggle. He leaned dangerously close to whisper in Hyunjin's ear, "I think that's Min Min from cheer. *Total* drama queen."

And as if to prove it, the door to the kitchen's squeaked open only to be followed by a long groan.

"Oh come *on!* They really want us to carry like a million cupcakes all the way across the school? That's going to take all night!"

"If you keep doing nothing but complaining, then yeah, it will." The other girl said with another sigh. "Help me find a cart or something we can load up to make this easier."

They listened to the sound of the two girls poking around the kitchen. Doors opened and shut and Min Min from cheer seemed to sigh deeply nearly every ten seconds, like she was well and truly at her wits end.

"Ah-ha! Found one!" The mystery second girl crowed in victory.

"Ugh, *finally,*" Min Min replied, stomping over towards the cupcakes presumably as she said, "Let's get this over with."

"Why did you even volunteer to be on the committee if you hate it this much?" The second girl asked and Hyunjin couldn't help but tilt his head side to side in a way that said he too had been wondering that.

Felix nodded along silently, leaning a little to the side like he wanted to make sure he could hear her answer.

A dreamy sigh came from the other girl, a complete 180 from her whining two seconds before. "Because Channie asked me too."

Felix fake gagged at the hearts you could hear in her eyes and Hyunjin swatted him on the shoulder, trying to stifle his giggle.

"He didn't *ask* you, Min. He asked *me.* You just happened to be standing next to me and *threw* yourself at him."

"Okay, *first of all,* he didn't ask me because he's too much of a gentleman to ask his future wife to do any kind of gross manual labor like this. And secondly? You only said yes because you know he's friends with Binnie and you *looooove* Binnie-"

"Oh my *god,* shut up!"

Felix's mouth dropped open, his eyes wide and shocked as he hit Hyunjin over and over

on the chest like he was trying to make sure he was paying attention.

Hyunjin stilled his kitten pawed assault by pinning his hand against his chest and pressing it there.

They both leaned a little further out of safety and toward the tea that was spilling all over the fucking place. They were still completely hidden and breathing the same air but still, they strained towards the fresh air beyond their hiding spot.

Min Min snickered, obviously very proud of herself.

The other girl, to her credit, merely let out the ninth sigh since she'd stepped foot in the room and continued. "Now shut up and help me get the cart loaded. The faster we get this done, the sooner you can go back to following Chan like a shadow."

The other girl grumbled but their chatter finally died down as they started moving tray after tray onto the cart they'd found.

Once they left with the first load, he and Felix should be able to slip out and race their way back to the gymnasium, their mission deemed successful.

But then there was a brief pause followed by a confused voice. "Do these cupcakes look…weird to you?"

"I mean yeah, their fucking *green.*"

"No, not that! It looks like, I dunno. Like one is missing."

Hyunjin felt a wash of cold fear pour over his body. Because right when they'd heard the approaching footsteps, he'd been busy securing one last strawberry cupcake for Felix. He'd grabbed it right before he'd pulled them to safety and had completely forgotten about it in the fray. He hadn't had time to fix the spacing and cover his tracks.

And now, there it was: a void where a cupcake clearly should be.

He sheepishly raised his hand up, showing the blond his mistake topped in cream cheese frosting. He offered a sickly little smile that he desperately hoped would lessen any rage from his accomplice.

But he really should have known better because Felix didn't harbor

nasty things like rage or hatred. Not over things like this, at least. So it shouldn't have been so relieving when the blond took a long look at the cupcake and then smiled. Warm and small but real.

Feeling himself thaw a little, Hyunjin silently nudged it toward him, silently offering it. After all, he'd snagged it for the blond because he was powerless to resist the puppy dog pout.

Felix bit his lip, holding in his giggle even as the apples of his cheeks grew round and cheerful. He took the cupcake in hand and carefully peeled back the wrapper. He took a big bite before nudging it back to Hyunjin.

So he took a bite of his own, slowly sharing it as they listened to their peers theorize about where the missing cupcake had gone.

"Oh my god, you don't think we have *rats,* do you?" Min Min sounded utterly horrified at the very idea and Felix had to bite his lip *hard* to keep from laughing.

He moved in close, lips nearly brushing Hyunjin's ear as he whispered, "I think she means *cats."*

A giggle slipped out and Hyunjin moved before he could think. He slapped a hand over Felix's mouth, shushing him quickly and effectively. They were so close to escaping this; he wasn't going to let them go down like this.

"A rat capable of taking an *entire* cupcake and not leaving a single crumb behind?" The other girl said skeptically.

Min Min muttered something but it wasn't clear what.

The stacking sound of trays resumed and Hyunjin felt his shoulders drop. He looked back down to find Felix, eyes wide over his hand. He could feel the heat of his cheeks and slowly peeled his palm away.

He smiled bashfully, hoping he hadn't crossed some kind of line.

But Felix was looking at him like he'd never seen him before. He was looking at him like he wanted *more.* And Hyunjin didn't know what to do with that but he did know he was melting. That gravitational force from earlier was back. The one that pushed and pulled them together. The one that made his blood race and sing and *ache.*

Felix was so close and he was so pretty and his freckles were out and

god, Hyunjin hadn't even told him he was beautiful yet tonight. Like an absolute waste of space, like the tragic loser he was, he *still* hadn't stopped Felix and looked him in the eyes and told him that he was the most stunning person in the entire dance.

So instead, he just locked eyes and tried to yell through them. He hoped, deep in his pupils, down at the very bottom, Felix would find the subtitles.

He watched in amazement as the bickering of the two girls got fuzzy in his ears and Felix's eyes fluttered and dropped. Down to his lips.

His breath stopped and picked up again, shallow and useless.

It was too hot back here. They were too close.

Almost as if in a trace, Felix raised his hand, slowly and purposefully cradling the side of Hyunjin's face like it was something precious. And then, the warm pad of his thumb brushed out, sliding over the corner of his lip like a whisper. Hardly there and yet all he could hear, all he could *feel.*

He felt like his heart was going to break his ribs. He felt like he was going to faint if he got any closer and yet all he wanted, all he'd *ever* truly wanted was to be closer.

Felix held his eyes as he pulled his hand back, a smudge of frosting on the side of his thumb. His big brown eyes flickered down to glance at it before they glued themselves back to Hyunjin's and he popped his thumb in his mouth.

Hyunjin actually stopped breathing.

There had been cutesy flirting and tender hand holds and innocent little moments between them. But this? This felt like fire.

Total and all consuming fire. It started down at his feet and licked up his body in hungry waves that threatened to pull him under or forward or *anywhere* that would put them closer.

He had a crush, yes. He liked him, sure. He was pretty sure he even *loved* him. But the one thing he had hardly even let himself consider was that he *wanted* him.

A shuddering breath escaped his lips. And while it was hardly a sound, it felt loud in their stillness.

Hyunjin froze, wondering if his lust had just gotten them caught.

But instead, he heard one last sigh from cheer squad Min Min and the sound of the kitchen doors squeaking open before falling closed again. The sound of heels clicking further and further away.

They stayed, frozen. Pressed to each other. Hyunjin aching for a taste of frosting on lips. But the blond took a deep breath, breaking the trance.

“I guess we should make our escape now,” He said quietly. “While we can.”

Hyunjin nodded dumbly, following his lead because he could do nothing else in life but follow Felix. It was probably his calling or his purpose in life or something.

The heat of the moment cooled some in the silvery moonlight of the kitchen, tray after tray of cupcakes still waiting to be picked up and delivered to the dance.

“Come on,” Felix said, voice lower and sober. The giggles from earlier having leveled off into something more settled. More like a comforting warmth than the fire Hyunjin had been steeped in only moments ago.

Hyunjin nodded and reached out, threading their fingers together.

The blond smiled and nodded, tightening his grip as they slipped back out of the kitchen and back to the dance.

*****

They returned to the dance like they’d never left. Like they hadn’t had an entire adventure. Like they hadn’t been pressed against one another, breathing the same air and going slowly insane.

And Hyunjin liked to believe that the insanity was mutual. Because Felix kept holding his hand. Fearless and forward, he led Hyunjin through the crowd of awkwardly gyrating students until they found their friends, hopping around and dancing like there was no tomorrow.

The brunette felt his nerves stretched thin. He loved to dance, in

theory. He loved to throw on whatever album he was currently obsessing over and put on a whole ass concert in his room. *Alone.* But this was in the middle of a dance floor, full of sweaty students with sticky eyes who were still wondering just what kind of spell he'd cast on their resident angel.

But when the blond looked up at him with a face splitting grin, beckoning him, "Come on, Jin Jin! Dance with me!" he summoned every last ounce of courage he had and discarded the scraps of dignity he'd clung to and started to shuffle awkwardly.

He was sure it looked pretty painful but you'd think he was Juilliard level with the way Felix was beaming at him. The blond twirled around him, laughing and giggling and threading their fingers back together over and over again.

Chan had a red nosed Binnie on video call, dancing him around to say hi to everyone. Jisung was clinging to Minho like he was afraid he'd disappear but Minho really didn't seem to mind; he clung right back. Seungmin was also clinging to them as a unit, completely delighted by how efficient of a third wheel he was being.

Jeongin came dancing on over to Hyunjin and Felix, shoulders bopping to the beat.

"Aww, looks like I lost my dance partner," He said with a halfhearted pout.

It took Hyunjin a second to realize that he was talking about Felix. "Oh! Sorry, I didn't mean to step on any toes. I can-"

"Hyunjin," Jeongin interrupted, his pout turning into an amused eye roll. "Shut up and keep dancing. I don't mind. Really." His eyes slid over to the smiling, giggling Felix that was grabbing onto Hyunjin's arms and tossing his head from side to side.

He was the picture of carefree and Hyunjin wanted to know what it felt like too. So when the blond threw his hands up as the next song started, bass heavy and loud, Hyunjin threw his head back and smiled at the ceiling like it was his best friend. He let the flashing lights from the cheap party rentals wash over him, painting his vision red and blue and pink. He slid his fingers back in between Felix's like they belonged there and spun the blond under his arm.

He was rewarded by a squealing laugh that he knew he'd play on repeat in his head tonight when he was trying to sleep.

He brought Felix in close before swinging him out again, in a pseudo-swing sort of style that didn't match the song at *all* but it had the blond laughing. And that's all that mattered.

Hyunjin felt his reserves melting away, like the crowd didn't even exist anymore. It was just him and Felix, alone in a gymnasium draped in crepe paper. Just them and the fog machine that was blanketing the floor in thin clouds. Just them with the overly thumping music and the colorful lights flashing over skin and teeth. Turning smiles red, then pink, then blue then back to red. A total dreamscape of nothing but them.

The songs kept playing, one after another and Hyunjin found himself hoping, *praying,* that they would never end. That if they kept dancing, it would somehow trick the night into lasting forever.

But time didn't really work like that. It slowed, sticky like it wanted to stay, but it still moved forward.

The lighting dimmed, the songs slowed. Lilting piano and crooning lyrics and slowly, the dancefloor melted into something blue and calm. Something sweet and careful.

Jisung melted shyly against Minho and Minho held him close. His fingers digging into Jisung's waist like he was *terrified* to let him go. Seungmin, Chan and Jeongin melted away with secret little smiles as everyone paired off.

Hyunjin was about to pull away when Felix's grip on his hand tightened. Small fingers, strong in his grasp as he pulled him close. His arms looped around Hyunjin's neck, his cheek resting over his heart.

And they began to sway.

Hyunjin's heart stuttered. His hands flexed uselessly, hovering over Felix's waist, unsure what to do or where to go.

But tonight had already been a dream, so why wake up now?

He took a deep breath and settled his hands, feather light, on Felix's waist. He swore the blond pressed closer, his grip tightening.

And they continued to sway.

Song after song, never letting go. No words, no eye contact. Just slow and sure melting. Hyunjin could feel the tension bleeding out of

Felix's body. The little shifts he made to get closer, like chest to chest wasn't enough.

He wondered if the blond could hear the way his heart was pounding. He wondered if he knew what that meant. He wondered if he'd figure it out and let go.

But he didn't. He only clung tighter. Edging his way closer and closer like until their feet were getting tangled and the blond was stepping on Hyunjin's feet every other step.

He laughed, breathy and tired. "Sorry," He muttered, finally taking a tiny step back to look up at Hyunjin.

"It's okay," He whispered back, voice nearly drowned out by the dulcet tones of the current ballad. "I don't mind."

And he didn't. As long as Felix was close, he didn't care if he stepped on his toes or even broke his fucking heart.

They swayed on the creaky wood floors until the lights came on. Too bright and too real. The DJ announced that he was starting his last few songs of the night and Hyunjin could see the depressed, tired teachers looking up to the ceiling as if they were thanking God. The last song hadn't even started yet and they were already beginning the clean up.

Hyunjin glanced unwillingly at his borrowed wrist watch. Curfew was still thirty minutes away but he didn't want to risk it.

With a long sigh, he pulled back from Felix, feeling like he was leaving a piece of himself behind.

"I should probably take you home."

The words tasted sour on his tongue, especially when the blond frowned in response.

Hyunjin threaded his fingers into that downy soft fur at the base of his ears. "I know, Lixie. Me too."

The blond tilted his head, chasing the last lingering scratches greedily before Hyunjin finally pulled back. Felix wasted no time linking their fingers together as they made the rounds, saying bye to all of their friends.

As Felix let go to give Jisung a hug, the two twins whispering God knows what in each other's ears, Hyunjin felt a presence move in next to him.

He turned his head just enough to see Minho standing there with a soft look on his face. He was gazing at Jisung like he was the only thing he could see. The only person on the *planet.*

And god, if all he could see was Jisung when *Felix* was standing *right there?* Then that was love. Pure and simple, undiluted love.

“Thanks.”

Hyunjin almost thought he'd hallucinated it. But when he glanced over, he found that same, alarmingly soft smile aimed at him.

“Me?” He said, eyes wide and shocked. He pointed at his own chest in disbelief, like Minho needed a visual aid to determine that he indeed did *not* mean Hyunjin.

But the fellow brunette merely nodded, a shining light of amusement buried underneath.

“B-but…for *what?”*

He *finally* got the very Minho reaction of an eye roll, even if it was way less sassy than normal and, for some reason, it sort of eased Hyunjin's anxiety.

“For telling me to get off my ass and fight.”

Hyunjin blinked. “I'm very certain I have *never* said those words. To *anyone.”*

But Minho sighed like he genuinely enjoyed Hyunjin's confusion with something like fond affection. “You told me to make it obvious. To make him listen before he could run away.”

Hyunjin nodded. Those words sounded *much* more familiar. “Yeah, so you climbed on a table and yelled across the lunchroom at him.”

Minho snorted. “Yeah, I did.” His eyes strayed back to Jisung. The other boy noticed, and when their eyes caught, Hyunjin saw the way Jisung blushed. It wasn't subtle. But it wasn't shy either. He smiled at Minho with bright red cheeks like he *wanted* him to know what he did to him.

“And it was so fucking worth it.”

Hyunjin looked back to Minho and found him still watching Jisung before he shook his head like he really couldn't believe it and looked back to the taller boy.

“So thank you.” He said again. “And in case you need to hear it too, he likes you too. So make it obvious. Don't let him get away.”

Hyunjin swallowed thickly, his own eyes drifting to Felix like they remembered the gravitational pull he had. Like it was inevitable. He nodded, too nervous to actually say it out loud.

Because he wasn't Minho. He wasn't brave and brash and unapologetic. He was Hyunjin: timid and quiet and constantly melting down over little things like smiles and the brush of fingertips.

But when he looked over to Felix and Jisung hugging goodbye for what might actually be the final time, he realized he only saw Felix. So yeah, maybe he and Minho had *something* in common.

The blond skipped back over to his side, lacing their fingers together like it was the easiest thing in the world and smiling up at him like he'd come home.

They finally finished their goodbyes, leaving Hyunjin with only 20 minutes until curfew.

He opened the door of the car for Felix, earning him a giggle as he offered a small bow. He got in on the driver's side, making sure Felix buckled his seat belt before he slowly backed out of his spot.

The radio hummed low static in the background but Hyunjin sort of liked it. It was peaceful. It insulated the inside of the car like the cooling night couldn't touch them.

“I miss the bike,” Felix said softly, eyes watching the world pass them by.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Hyunjin smiled, keeping his eyes on the road. “But the helmet would have messed up your hair.”

The blond shrugged and finally looked away from the window, eyes

falling in Hyunjin's profile instead.

“Yeah, I know.” He said quietly before adding, “But we should go for a ride soon.”

“I'd like that,” Hyunjin said quietly, biting the inside of his cheek to contain his smile.

If Felix wanted to go for a ride soon, then that had to mean he hadn't totally failed tonight, right? It meant, maybe, just *maybe,* there could be hope.

Hyunjin was pulled from his nervous hope as he parked the car on the street.

The sound of silence was loud as he turned the car off. Gone was the static-y radio and the gentle hum of the heater and left behind was a soft silence that Hyunjin didn't know how to fill.

He cleared his throat and popped his door open. He circled the car and opened Felix’s door, offering his hand like a wannabe prince.

The blond took it, easy as breathing and let the taller boy lead him up to the front door.

The porch light was shining but the curtains were still. Either Ara and Gang-Min were sleeping or they'd found a better way to spy.

Hyunjin turned to face Felix, their hands holding in between them as Felix drifted closer. Almost like he didn't even mean too.

“I had a lot of fun tonight.” Hyunjin said, voice coming out a little shaky. He was nervous, his palms clammy and trembling. He didn't want tonight to end. It had been all he could think about for weeks now. And in a few minutes, it would be over. The memory of a dream come true.

“Me too, Jin Jin.” Felix said, inching closer. “*So* much fun.”

Hyunjin had his eyes nailed to his feet, convinced if he looked at Felix and found his big brown eyes, he's do something stupid like cry.

But then there was a little squeeze and a nervous little voice.

“Hyunjin?”

And *that?* His full name on Felix's tongue? *That* got his attention.

Because Felix never called him Hyunjin. Not since the very beginning. He called him Jinnie and Jin and Jin Jin. But never *Hyunjin.*

It rang in the darkness, pulling his eyes in.

Felix was gazing up at him. “I uh…I'm gonna ask you something and you can totally say no, okay?”

He waited until Hyunjin nodded.

The blond nodded to himself, like he was trying to hype himself up. “I uh…have you ever…kissed someone?”

Hyunjin's mind stalled out, even though the answer was easy. “N-no.”

He watched Felix take a slow breath in through his nose and nod, like it was either the answer he expected or the answer he wanted.

Which was crazy, right?

“Yeah uh…me neither.”

The brunette stared back, unable to process the words. The logical part of his brain wanted to deny it. How could someone like *Felix,* be kissless?

But the romantic side of his brain? Oh it was soaked in adoration for this beautiful, wonderful man who maybe believed that kisses were special. Who maybe had saved the first one in the hopes that it would be shared with someone who cherished it. Cherished *him.*

“And I just…I had so much fun tonight! The whole thing! The dancing and the cupcakes and the way you kept opening my doors for me and I just, I just, I know if I had gone with *anyone else,* it wouldn't have been as fun.” Felix was breathing hard, his eyes getting this frantic little tinge like he was scared Hyunjin was going to run.

“And like, it's *always* like that with you! Even if we're just scrolling Pinterest or studying or like, sitting at the lunch table listening to Changbin and Channie fight about protein intake or whatever, it's *fun.* Because I'm with *you.”*

Hyunjin felt his own breathing becoming more labored. He felt like he'd just finished a long run. He felt his heart aching with something new. Something like nerves and excitement and desperate hope.

Felix's hands tightened in his, almost painfully, as he tiptoed closer.

“Jin Jin?”

“Yeah, Lixie?”

The blond took a deep breath. “Will you…I want *you to* be my first kiss.”

Hyunjin had to bite back a sob. He wanted to ask if he was sure. He wanted to ask if he meant it. He wanted to ask if he knew what this was doing to Hyunjin's *heart* right now.

But before he could, Felix added with a steady voice. “You can totally say no. I just…I want it to be you. I don't…I don't want to share it with anyone else.”

Oh and Hyunjin was so fucking gone. So *fucking gone.*

He took a shuddering breath in and forced his feet to detach from the concrete. His hand pulled from Felix's fingers and for a split second, he swore the blond was going to panic.

But he calmed the moment Hyunjin's palm cupped the side of his face.

“Are you sure?” He asked.

Felix nodded instantly. No hesitation, no wavering. Just eyes that begged him to move forward.

So he did.

Because it was finally time to do something. Something obvious that would prove to Felix that he wasn't going to break his heart.

He had to bend down, just like he'd imagined. He could feel the warm, shaky exhale wash over his lips, just like he'd imagined. And he felt butterflies erupt in his stomach, just like he'd imagined.

But the way Felix melted into him? The way the blond sighed as *soon* as their lips met, like he'd been waiting all his life for this? The way his nerves disappeared in an instant and were replaced by *more* and *closer* and *Felix?*

He couldn't have even *dreamed* of this.

Felix's arms came up, looping around his neck softly like he was swimming through a dream. And Hyunjin placed his free hand on the

shorter man's waist, like they were dancing again.

Because it felt right and exhilarating and scary and perfect and all he ever wanted to do was be in this moment, with Felix.

The second their kiss broke, Felix swayed forward, catching Hyunjin's lips again. Soft. Lingering.

Hyunjin held on for dear life, terrified he'd open his eyes and find his bedroom ceiling staring back at him. Mocking him for thinking such an obvious dream could have been his reality.

But when the kiss ended, their breathing shallow and loud between them, when Hyunjin's eyes finally fluttered open, Felix was still there.

And he was smiling up at him.

“That was uh…wow.”

“Was that okay?” Hyunjin asked shakily.

And Felix answered by kissing him again. Soft and light, almost like it didn't happen. “It was perfect. Everything I'd waited for.”

“S-same.” Hyunjin said. And just in case it wasn't painfully obvious by the way he was clutching Felix's waist, he forced himself to say it out loud. “I really like you, Lixie. Like…so fucking much.”

A soft giggle sounded from the blond and he swore he could taste his smile when curved lips landed on his again.

“I really like you too, Jin Jin.”

He wished this moment could continue forever. He wished that the world would just stop for a little bit so he could keep Felix close and not worry about silly things like curfews when his entire universe was currently rewriting itself.

But the world kept spinning and he felt Felix dropping back down off his tippy-toes. He smiled shyly up at the brunette, taking an unwilling step back.

“I’ll uh, I’ll see you on Monday?”

Hyunjin nodded dumbly, watching the blond disappear inside with the littlest wave and wishing it could be Monday already.

Chapter End Notes

I TOLD you guys I wanted to capture all the high school cliches and what's better than a school dance ending in a first kiss?? I'll see you on Sunday for more Hyunlix cuteness!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

> Hello and happy Sunday, beautiful readers! Thank you so much to everyone who is reading, leaving comments, kudos and just being a part of what I think is genuinely the best group of internet people I could ever hope for. Thank you so much ❤ Alright, enough of me being sappy! Let's go watch Hyunjin implode

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The problem with Monday was that it was nearly 24 hours away still and it had only taken Hyunjin a mere 20 minutes to fully convince himself that not only did the kiss not mean what he wanted it to mean but that he'd probably just hallucinated the whole thing to start with.

After all, on what planet did someone like *Felix* - a certified angel kitten who could do no wrong - ask someone like *Hyunjin* - a loser who could hardly string together a sentence without stuttering - to *kiss him?*

What if he'd just dreamed the entire dance?

What if he'd dreamed Felix entirely?

By the time he parked the car back at his parents house, he was having a silent crisis. He tried his hardest to slink in undetected but was immediately foiled when he opened the front door and found both of his parents standing at the top of the steps like they'd been *waiting.*

His mother had confirmed as much, descending the stairs like a super villain and saying, "We've been waiting," in a way that felt oddly ominous.

Jun-Ho followed right on her heels, hair sticking up in disarray and making Hyunjin think that he'd been trying to sleep when his wife had shaken him awake and announced that their son had survived this first date.

Physically? Sure. Emotionally? To be determined.

"So?" His mom asked excitedly, snagging his hand and giving him no option to decline as she dragged him to the kitchen. "How did it go?"

She gently shoved him down into a chair and grabbed what was obviously tea she'd prepped specifically for this chat.

"It was…good." Hyunjin said awkwardly.

"Good?" His mom said, her face looking shocked and almost disappointed by his choice of words. And like yeah, he fucking *got it.* Because no, tonight hadn't been just *good.* It had been amazing. Stupendous. Swoon worthy, romcom levels of fun and whimsy and high school cliches and he'd loved every goddamn minute of it.

But how did you say all that and then just walk away? How did he admit that they'd *kissed* and somehow, he still wasn't sure where they stood?

God, he was fucking helpless.

So he shrugged and skipped over most of it. He told them they'd danced and eaten tiny sandwiches. He'd told them about the decor and how Chan had been head of the planning committee. And then he faked a yawn and said he needed a shower and some sleep so he could omit the parts where he'd punched someone for the first time, stolen something for the first time and also *kissed* someone for the first time.

Truly, it had been a night of firsts.

But they didn't need to know all of that. So he said goodnight and ascended the stairs, peeling off his jacket along the way.

He made quick work of his shower before collapsing into bed, consumed by soft sweats and fluffy pillows. He let out a long sigh, checking his phone one last time and seeing zero messages from Felix before he clicked his bedside lamp off.

The darkness pressed in, carrying with it all of his doubts, all of his fears.

What if he was a bad kisser and Felix had just been too nice to tell him that he'd hated it? What if he showed up to school on Monday and Felix pulled a Jisung, avoiding him at all costs? What if Hyunjin had to climb on a fucking lunch table and profess his love only to be shot down in front of the entire student body? He'd *seen* Felix turn people down before; he *knew* how sweet and lethal it would be.

Or worse! What if he showed up on Monday and Felix acted like nothing had happened? What if they never talked about it again?

What if they graduated and went to college and one day, Felix met someone he actually, *really* liked and was just relieved that he could honestly say he had indeed kissed someone before. And when that guy asked who, Felix would just laugh and swat his hand carelessly and say coyly, “Oh, just some guy,”

What if Hyunjin was reduced to ‘*just some guy’* one day?

What if he spent the rest of his life thinking about this night and *Felix* and he was just *some guy?*

Morning took its sweet time coming and by the time the sun was rising, Hyunjin was peeling himself off his rumpled sheets in defeat. He’d hardly slept a wink, desperately hoping that he’d get some kind of notification that Felix had texted him. But alas, the blond was probably purring in his bed, completely unphased by the fact that their *lips had fucking touched on purpose last night.*

The brunette groaned, forcing himself up and out of bed. He brushed his teeth lazily and splashed a little cold water on his face before deciding to get in a run. It wasn’t like he had the energy for it but if he simply sat on his ass all day, he’d almost certainly go insane. Or like…*more* insane than he already was.

He left a note for his parents, deciding to leave his phone behind. If he had it swimming in his pocket, he’d probably spend the entire run checking for messages. And what he needed right now was *escape.* Not *more* rumination.

And he tried, he really, truly did. He set out at a low and slow pace, focusing on placing one foot in front of the other. He focused on the rhythm of his feet on the pavement. The predictable sound of his steps that could lull him into a trance sometimes. It could be calming as the tides. Variable but steady, never wavering when he ran and ran and ran until his knees screamed.

But today, it felt less like running toward something and more like running *away.* So he pushed his speed, hoping the burn in his lungs would replace the racing thoughts. But they just made his heart ache in fresh ways. His labored breathing reminded him of their shallow breaths after the kiss. Standing, forehead to forehead and sharing their air.

So he pushed his legs faster. He hoped the brisk wind raking through his hair would pull the circles of thoughts getting tangled just underneath but they only festered more, racing faster and faster like

they were trying to out pace him.

And god, it really felt like they were winning.

Maybe he should text him. Maybe he could send Felix a little good morning. Nothing crazy, nothing too heavy, nothing with much expectation. Just a message.

But by the time he made it home, after *hours* of running, his body thoroughly wrecked from the damn near impromptu marathon he'd run this morning, he was dead tired.

He dragged himself through a shower, short and hot before collapsing back on his bed and *actually* sleeping for what felt like the first time in years.

He woke up at noon to the sounds of his mother downstairs apparently moving furniture. At least, that's what it fucking sounded like.

He groggily rolled over and snatched his phone off his nightstand only to be *instantly* awake the moment he saw a glowing message from Felix.

Lixie💕 [10:15 AM]

JIN JIN

Lixie💕 [10:16 AM]

Jinnnnnniiiiieeeeeee

Lixie💕 [10:17 AM]

Jin Jin, is it Monday yet?

Hyunjin stared at the message longer than he should have. The words were all very small and half of them were just his name. Monday was a day of the week and he'd learned those words way back in

elementary school, maybe even before. But all of those words together? After last night? It was nearly incomprehensible.

Lixie💕 [10:45 AM]

HYUNJIN-AH

Lixie💕 [10:48 AM]

Are you still sleeping???

He scrolled down, stunned to find even *more* messages.

Lixie💕 [11:04 AM]

Hyunnie?

Lixie💕 [11:06 AM]

Are you there?

Lixie💕 [11:15 AM]

Am I annoying you?

Lixie💕 [11:16 AM]

You can just tell me if I am, I promise

Lixie💕 [11:47 AM]

Sorry if I'm being weird…

His thumbs hovered over the keyboard, unsure what he should reply with when it vibrated in his hands

Lixie💕{12:19 AM]

You're not mad, right? About…ya know

Lixie💕 [12:19 PM]

Last night?

And suddenly, Hyunjin's heart was pounding and his fingers were flying as the ghost of Minho's voice reverberated in his skull.

Make it obvious you aren't going to break his heart.

Hyunjin [12:20 PM]

I'm mad I have to wait nearly 19 more hours to see you again, but not about last night

Hyunjin [12:20 PM]

I could NEVER be mad about last night, Lix

He sat there, clutching his phone so tightly he was afraid he'd crack the screen as he watched his text instantly go to read and the little bubbles start dancing.

Lixie💕 [12:21 PM]

You promise?

Hyunjin breathed out a laugh that wasn't much more than scared air. He was officially in uncharted territory but he was pretty sure there was no turning back now.

Hyunjin [12:22 PM]

Cross my heart, pinky swear, hand to god, scouts honor, all of it. Promise.

Lixie💕 [12:22 PM]

Wow

Lixie💕 [12:23 PM]

Sounds pretty serious

And Hyunjin didn't think. He didn't consult his tired, frazzled, confused brain anymore because all it seemed to do was get him all turned around and steeped in worry.

Hyunjin [12:24 PM]

I am, Lix. I am.

He saw the bubbles appear and disappear over and over again. He waited one minute, two minutes, ten. Until finally, a reply came.

Lixie💕 [12:35 PM]

❤□□❤□□❤□□

Hyunjin stared at those hearts longer than he'd ever admit. He decided that just for now, he'd let them mean what he wanted them too. He would take them at face value.

He felt his stomach rumble, having been neglected all day and decided it was time for some lunch. So when Felix's next message asked him what he was doing, he told him all about his great dilemma: spicy tuna kimbap or some leftover veggie spring rolls.

The blond provided pros and cons to both, switching to voice notes when he got tired of typing. Hyunjin worked on preparing his lunch (opting for the easier kimbap option), shuffling around the kitchen as Felix's voice memos played in the background. He recorded messages back, even letting his mom say hello when she stopped in to grab some water.

They texted as Felix did a load of laundry and asked if Hyunjin could bring him some yellow ribbon for his tail tomorrow. They texted as Hyunjin cleaned up his room, pulling every single thing out of his desk drawers and reorganizing it carefully.

They chatted until it was dinner time, the sun starting to set and Felix admitted he had some homework he still needed to do. And by the time he sent his last voice memo of the night, yawning and telling Hyunjin goodnight, the brunette felt pretty certain that tomorrow, no matter what, it wasn't going to be too bad.

*****

The halls were buzzing like they knew something he didn't. He'd entered the school and immediately been shocked to find people whispering behind their hands to their friends, eyes following him with question marks floating in them. And then he was shocked by how *shocked* he was. Because this used to be his normal. For most of his life, he'd always felt like he'd somehow simultaneously stuck out like a sore thumb *and* been invisible. It was like the world's worst super power that literally no one wanted and Hyunjin was stuck with.

He felt the eyes of his peers glued to his leather bound back like they couldn't quite figure him out. It wasn't until he rounded a corner and

some poor kid nearly dove headfirst into his locker, muttering, “Don’t hit me!” that he remembered.

He’d punched Ho-Jin straight in the jaw, right on the steps of the school. There had been a fucking *audience* to that show and he could only imagine that not only had word spread, but it had been stretched fantastically too.

He wondered how many people in this hall right now, truly believed he was a soon to be convicted killer.

He shook his head, reminding himself that it had been worth it. Ho-Jin had fucking *deserved* it. And while Hyunjin didn’t make a habit out of punching people he didn’t like in the face, he couldn’t find a single corner of his soul that regretted it.

If that single act of violence proved to the student body that he was the villain they all had wanted him to be, then fine. He’d do it a thousand times over if it meant standing up for Felix.

He turned the last corner and saw Felix crouched down and halfway buried in his locker like any other Monday. He was evidently battling something as he gave it a sharp tug and nearly fell back on his ass, scowling at whatever wasn’t budging in there.

Hyunjin bit back a laugh but just a little too late.

He saw the blond’s ears flicker before he shot to his feet, head whipping dramatically down the hallway and finding Hyunjin immediately.

“Jin Jin!” He cried, his smile turning up to a thousand watts as he left his locker open, deflated backpack on the floor and *sprinted* towards him.

The taller man didn’t have time to second guess anything or worry about the implications or hidden meanings. He simply opened his arms as Felix barreled into him at top speed.

“Whoa there!” He chuckled, stumbling back a couple steps but keeping them upright.

Felix was wearing a yellow and pink color blocked sweater. It was cropped but his baggy cargo jeans were highwaisted, keeping everything covered. His hair was tossed up in a claw clip but it only made the mess of waves and curls that much better. Tiny little pearl

earrings dangled from his ears, sparkling in the garish fluorescent lighting as he tilted his head back to smile up at Hyunjin.

“Hi Jin Jin,” He said happily, his arms tightening around Hyunjin’s waist like he never wanted to let go.

“Hey Lixie,” Hyunjin said back, eyes unable to stay away from those strawberry shortcake lips.

The blond’s eyes went soft, almost like they weren’t sharing the hall with dozens upon dozens of their peers. “I missed you,” He whispered.

“I missed you too,” Hyunjin admitted, even though he was pretty sure Felix could tell by now.

Felix giggled, squirming in place like those words gave him good shivers. “Well good, I’m glad,” He said easily, complete with a mock hair toss.

He dropped back down, flat onto his converse sneakered feet and easily found Hyunjin’s hand. He tugged him toward their lockers, students staring at them with shocked expressions. One girl was quite literally frozen, mouth open and a breakfast burrito hovering a few inches before it like she had completely forgotten her breakfast existed and was *right fucking there.*

And for once, Hyunjin really thought the stares and confusion were pretty apt because sincerely, how in the hell had he pulled this off? He too was pretty shocked to see a blond bombshell hanging off of him and smiling like he was seeing the sun for the first time in years.

“Oh, did you bring the ribbon?” Felix asked, trying to peek into Hyunjin's backpack like the curious kitten he was.

The brunette nodded, pulling a few different options from his bag, just like last time.

The blond squealed, positively delighted as he started inspecting each one carefully.

“How's the tail?” Hyunjin asked, eyes landing on the careful way it wrapped around Felix, like it was more terrified than usual of the crowd around it. It was unnaturally still, missing that tell tale little swish it usually carried. Something about that sort of broke Hyunjin's heart a little bit.

The blond shrugged, lips tipping down at the corners even though he shrugged. “It's fine.” He said. But it was almost like he could *tell* that Hyunjin was doubtful because he glanced up through his lashes and added, “Kinda hurts.”

Hyunjin's heart thumped painfully in his chest. He so badly wished he could just *fix* it. But he hasn't mastered the art of mending bones yet so instead he nodded towards the ribbon dangling from the blond’s fingers.

“Well why don't you take some Tylenol and I'll make this bandage look cuter?”

Felix blinked at him once before his face busted into a lip biting smile. “Oh my god, you're so…*ugh*!”

Hyunjin wasn't sure what that meant but based on context clues, it was a good thing.

While Felix rummaged in his locker, half submerged once again, Hyunjin squatted behind him. He carefully looped the chosen ribbon (a buttery lace) around and around the bandage until it was adequately disguised. He tied a puffy bow at the top, tightening it carefully.

“Alright, all done.”

The blond whipped around eagerly to inspect Hyunjin's handiwork, grinning when he poked the bow. “It's so *cute*! I might need to keep wrapping my tail even after it’s healed! It could be like, my *thing,* ya know?”

“Well I have plenty of ribbon so you're free to raid my stash anytime.”

Felix giggled again before shutting his locker. He stood up, tail wrapping back around him carefully but somehow looking happier than before.

“I don't think I have any Tylenol so I'm gonna run to the nurse before the first class, but I'll see you in calc?”

Hyunjin nodded, pulling the strap of his backpack a little higher up his shoulder. Would it be presumptuous to go in for another hug?

The answer to that was apparently no because next thing he knew, Felix was popping up on his toes and planting a kiss on his cheek,

right in the middle of the fucking hallway.

He swore to god, his heart almost exploded. He was so unprepared. So pleasantly surprised that he didn't know what else to do besides stand there, frozen, with bright red cheeks.

The blond either didn't notice the effect he had on Hyunjin or decided not to embarrass him by commenting on it. He merely gave the taller man's arm a quick squeeze before damn near skipping away.

Was this his life now?

Would this be his new normal?

He floated to his first class on total auto pilot. He missed every single word the teacher said and then somehow ended up in his second class and maybe his third? He wasn't totally sure though because he had zero recollection of it.

By the time the bell rang for his calculus class, his soul finally reentered his body long enough for him to speed walk to class. His teacher was surprised to see him busting through the door out of breath and wild eyed only to find that the blond had been *normal* and not sprinted to the least favorite class of the day.

Hyunjin sank down into his chair, eyes glued to the door, his heart jumping into his throat every time the door opened and revealed someone that *wasn't* his perfect kitten.

But just as the teacher was starting to clear his voice in that passive aggressive way that signaled it was time to start quieting down, the blond slipped in. Unnoticed by most but definitely not Hyunjin.

His eyes went all wide and dewy and pathetic because oh my god, it had been about 3 hours since Felix had kissed him on the cheek and he desperately needed to ask him if he'd just slipped and hit him with his lips accidentally.

But there was no time because the teacher was rapping his desk with the meter stick and officially calling the class to order.

So Hyunjin was stuck just staring across the room at him, trying to read his thoughts and hoping to the heavens that they weren't something like “oh my god, I can't believe I kissed such a loser.”

And while he was struggling with the whole mind reading thing, Felix

appeared to be great at it because as if Hyunjin had spoken his worries aloud, the blond's eyes flung out across the classroom to land on Hyunjin. A gentle, barely there blush spread over his cheeks and he offered a little fluttering wave of his fingers that fucking *destroyed* him.

He tried his hardest to pay attention to the lesson but, as was so often the case, he was distracted. Except this time instead of imagining what Felix's lips would feel like, he was *remembering* it.

And it was absolutely *devastating.*

In the best possible way.

He was busy trying to slow his heart rate to something further away from heart attack levels when a dense square of paper slapped onto his desk.

He damn near jumped out of his skin, eyes shooting to the student next to him who was nervously glancing back at him.

Confused, he looked back down to his desk and carefully picked up the little chunk of paper. It had been folded so many times that it had become a tiny little brick. He carefully and secretively slid it off his desk and into his lap so he could slowly begin to open it.

It took nearly five whole minutes, Hyunjin flinching every time the paper crinkled. He felt like he was opening snacks during the pivotal, quiet scene in a movie.

When he finally had the note open, he found only a few words.

Hey,

You're really cute

Xoxo, Lixie

Hyunjin promptly choked on nothing, dying quietly as he scrambled for his water. He took a sip, his heart slamming beneath his ribs as he reread the note a solid ten times.

The blond had penned this, folded it nearly into non-existence and

then used their peers to get it across the room to him. *Anyone* could have read it! All it would take was someone's nosy curiosity and *bam!* The whole school would know!

But then again, Felix *had* kissed him on the cheek in broad daylight, surrounded by other students.

So perhaps hiding whatever this was, wasn't that important to him. Perhaps he wasn't ashamed to be seen hanging off a tall, gangly loser with confidence issues.

Hyunjin swallowed thickly, feeling that bubbly little feeling starting to sparkle in his veins. The same one that felt like hope begging to take root. So he carefully, non-chalantly slid the page back up onto his desk, laying it on his notebook so it would blend in. Under the guise of taking detailed notes, he hunched over the note and replied

That's high praise coming from the king of cute himself

He debated drawing a little winky face next to it but chickened out. He was already pushing himself to refold the note and initiate the transfer back through the grapevine of students. He didn't need to go *totally* crazy.

He nudged the person who had handed him the note and was beyond relieved when they simply took it and started passing it back the way it had come. Sure, they'd flinched a little when he leaned toward them but it could have been worse he supposed.

He tried not to watch its path too closely, so as to not make it obvious he was passing notes in class. Last thing he wanted was a fucking neon sign announcing it to the teacher. He would *die* if the teacher made him read this out loud.

Thankfully, the note made it safe and sound, flicked onto Felix’s desk by a girl who was smirking at him like she knew *exactly* what was going on.

The blond cheerily winked at her in thanks and carefully slipped the note under his desk, just like Hyunjin had. The paper reappeared, slid on top of his notes as he read Hyunjin's note.

Hyunjin watched with bated breath, ready to feel the regret crush him any second. But before it could descend upon him, he watched Felix go still.

The blond's spine straightened like a cartoon. Starting from the base and shivering all the way up his back. He saw the hair on the tips of Felix's ears fluff up, almost like it was standing at attention. His cheeks flooded with heat, a delicious pink washing down his neck.

Hyunjin watched in amazement as the blond bit his bottom lip, squeezing his knees together like he was about three seconds away from jumping out of chair. He squirmed excitedly and Hyunjin had to bite back his own smile.

If taking a chance and being willing to humiliate himself with brazen honesty got him *this* reaction? He would have to start taking more chances.

He watched as the blond chewed the back of his pencil, deep in thought as he tried to come up with a response. He wrote something but then frowned and erased it and with vigor. He wrote something else but apparently decided against that one too, frowning at the page like it was a puzzle he couldn't figure out.

Hyunjin watched him attempt at least three more responses, seemingly displeased with each attempt. He looked about ten seconds from trying to light it on fire with his mind when the bell tolled.

Students raced out of the door, the teacher yelling after everyone that they needed to show their work to receive full credit on their homework.

Hyunjin was up and out of his seat immediately, blank notes shoved back into his bag with little to no care as he threw it over his shoulder and strode toward the blond.

“Oh my *god,* Jin Jin!” Felix said, sounding *delightfully* scandalized. He sprung up with a playful little pout as he gave Hyunjin a soft slap to the chest. Maybe the way his fingers lingered for an extra second was all in his head but he didn’t care as Felix took a step forward, like he simply wanted to be closer.

He tipped his head back to look up at Hyunjin, biting his lower lip. “Who told you that you could make me blush like this?”

Hyunjin couldn’t help but melt into his eyes a little bit. They were

warm and welcoming and if he didn't second guess every little moment, it was easy to see fondness swimming in them.

"I was simply stating a fact," Hyunjin said with a shrug.

The blond hummed, "Well, in that case, I think I prefer *queen,*"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Felix said, finally backing up to grab his bag. He threw it over his shoulders as they started to slowly make their way to the cafeteria, hands swinging dangerously close and yet not close enough.

"And why's that?" Hyunjin asked, even though he could guess about a hundred reasons.

The blond started ticking reasons off on his fingers immediately, like it was something he'd actually considered before. "Pretty dresses, generally less responsibility, cool political meetings disguised as tea parties and social gatherings and I think tiaras are more my style than a big, clunky crown."

Hyunjin hummed thoughtfully, "Sounds like you've put a lot of thought into this."

"It may have crossed my mind once or twice," Felix said casually. "But I guess that would mean there's still an opening for a king."

Hyunjin could *hear* the little lilt in his voice teasing him. "Yeah? Anyone in mind?"

"Oh, I dunno," Felix said, drawing the words out in a playful way as he swayed into Hyunjin, nudging their shoulders together. "Maybe my boyfriend?"

And just like that, Hyunjin was completely offline.

Of course Felix would want his significant other to be the king to his queen. Easy, simple and obvious. That, Hyunjin could understand. What he *couldn't* understand was why the blond said it to his feet, like he was *bashful.* Like he was shy when he nudged Hyunjin with his shoulder and said the word '*boyfriend*'.

He felt the overwhelming need to ask if that position had been taken yet or if the blond was still taking applications but he couldn't figure out how to say it without throwing up or something.

Because yeah, he and Felix had kissed. On the lips. Like…*multiple times.* And yeah, Felix had been sort of flirty and had written him a cute note and kissed him on the cheek this morning but did all of that really add up to *boyfriend* territory?

He hadn't even taken him on a proper date yet!

This was *not* how romance was supposed to work! He was supposed to be a proper gentleman; opening doors and laying down red carpets and kissing the fucking ground he walked on because Felix was a goddamn angel and he was but a mere mortal who was so very thankful to be blessed with his presence.

But his beautiful, perfect angel seemed to forget he was in fact a beautiful, perfect angel because Hyunjin's stunned silence had him glancing up at the brunette nervously.

Hyunjin wanted to assure them as they entered the cafeteria and got in line for food but all of his words were lost. He wasn't even really sure if he'd ever possessed the kind of vocabulary to handle this sort of situation.

"I uh…sorry. Maybe it's too soon to…I just, I thought, since we…ya know," Felix went quiet, his lips twisting painfully to the side like he was trying and failing to hold in his cringe. "Sorry." He finally said with an awkward laugh that sort of sounded like he wanted to run away and hide under a rock.

Hyunjin would know. While he may not have invented it, he'd definitely perfected it over the years.

"No, no, no, don't be *sorry!*" He hurried to say, nearly dropping his tray for no other reason than the excess of adrenaline spiking through his bloodstream. "I j-just, I just-"

Oh god, he was going to say it, wasn't he? He had to though; he needed to hear him *say* it or he knew his brain would never believe it.

"But just…me? A-are…are you talking about *me*?"

The blond froze in his path, nearly causing the person behind him to walk right into him. They dodged but just barely, muttering under their breath. But Hyunjin wasn't really paying too much attention because he was busy staring back at Felix's wide eyes and raised eyebrows.

Balancing his tray on one hand, he popped the other one onto his hip and leveled him a highly judgemental look. “Do you think I go around kissing just anyone?”

The blush rushed to Hyunjin’s face in record time. “No! N-no, not at all! I just…*me*? Are you *sure?*”

There appeared to be a war going on behind Felix’s eyes. Part of him probably wanted to roll his eyes at Hyunjin for being so ridiculous but that endlessly compassionate heart of his won out. His face softened, his lips turning up subtly at the corners.

“Yeah, Jin Jin. I’m sure.” He said simply. “Never been more sure. I mean…if that’s okay?”

Okay?

Okay?!

“It’s so much more than okay, Lixie.” Hyunjin said on an exhale, breathless and melting.

The blond beamed up at him, looking excited and almost a little relieved. Like he’d imagined some crazy alternate timeline where Hyunjin would say *no.*

“Well then,” Felix said, tucking his pout to the side in a cutesy little way and reaching out to loop his index finger through Hyunjin’s. “Come on, boyfriend. Let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

That word echoed in Hyunjin's head over and over again, completely washing away the noise of the cafeteria around them. It was funny how such a soft, giddy little word could be ten times louder than a fucking gunshot.

Hyunjin thought his ears might actually be ringing as he dutifully and dumbly followed his *boyfriend* to their table.

He sat down next to him, like a good boyfriend and helped him open his carton of milk when he struggled with it. He nodded politely to all of their friends even though he couldn't decipher a single word any of them were saying. After all, he didn't want his *boyfriend* to think he was rude. He even offered his *boyfriend* his jacket when he noticed the way he shivered in his little sweater.

He was bound and determined to be the most perfect boyfriend ever.

He never wanted to give Felix *any* reason to revoke this privilege from him. He planned to take whatever clerical error had happened in the timelines and run with it all the way to the altar if he could.

"*Sunshine!"*

Hyunjin looked up to see Binnie dropping his tray on the table with a clatter looking utterly dejected. He rounded the table, looking tired as he scooped the blond into his arms.

"Sunshine, I'm *so sorry."*

*"*Sorry?" Felix squeaked, sounding confused even as he returned the hug on instinct.

"About fucking *Ho-Jin!* Chan told me all about it. I should have been there, Lix."

"Binnie, you were sick," Felix said, petting a hand down the bulky man's back.

But he just snorted. "So? I wasn't there and you got hurt. I promised I'd always catch you and I failed. And I'm so sorry, Lix."

"Oh Binnie," Felix cooed, his voice so soft as he awkwardly hugged back from his position at the table. "It's not your fault. Not at all."

Changbin let out a long sigh before Felix added, "Plus, Jin Jin punched him in the face so maybe he'll finally learn his lesson."

Hyunjin heard Minho snort from down the table. "Doubt it,"

He couldn't help but agree. As much as he hated it, it was *almost* admirable how thick headed and persistent that man was.

Almost.

"Chan told me about that too!" Binnie said, his sad voice lifting from the depths to something almost giddy. Next thing Hyunjin knew, strong arms were wrapped around him and trying to squeeze the very life out of him.

"I'm so fucking proud of you, Hyunnie! I can't believe I missed it! You totally kicked his ass!"

"It was just…one punch!" Hyunjin wheezed, flailing lightly for his life.

Changbin didn't seem to notice his life force slipping away though. He merely squeezed tighter, probably seconds from cracking a rib and he joyously declared Hyunjin his hero.

“Okay, okay, let go of my boyfriend before I get jealous!” Felix said it with a laugh that held a curious little edge to it. Like he was hiding the truth in broad daylight.

Hyunjin felt the air go still, sort of like it did before a storm.

“Boyfriend?!” Jeongin yelped, jumping to his feet, eyes wild and *begging* Felix to confirm it.

The blond nodded shyly before Jeongin let out a whoop of excitement and ran around the table to hug him.

Changbin hauled Hyunjin out of his chair, forcing him to jump up and down with him as he let out an ear piercing squeal that had the entire cafeteria staring. He felt pats on his back and shoulders that he assumed were Chan or Seungmin but couldn't confirm because he was currently in the most joyful death grip, fighting for his life.

Just as he thought he'd have to resort to biting to free himself, Changbin finally released him, backing up to smile at him with all his might. “What the fuck?! *Finally,* dude!”

Hyunjin attempted a smile back but it was feeble as he focused on filling his lungs with sweet, sweet air.

He felt a much calmer presence sidle up beside him and glanced over to see Minho smirking at him. He nodded once, as if to say ‘*welcome to the club’* and Hyunjin simply returned it, thankful for the less tactile congratulations.

“Jinnie! We need to double date! You and Lixie and me and Minnie!” Jisung excitedly said from across the table. He was leaning forward aggressively, eyes shining.

The word sent a lightning bolt through Hyunjin's body.

Date.

That's what he'd forgotten! He'd been so busy obsessing over being the perfect boyfriend that he's forgotten the *literal first step!*

“Oh my god,” he muttered, absolutely horrified.

“Jin Jin?” Felix asked, ducking down low to try to catch his thousand yard stare. “What's wrong?”

“Lixie, I…I can't be your boyfriend! I haven't even taken you on a proper date yet!”

He watched the blond tilt his head in confusion.

Hyunjin sighed. “Felix, I'm supposed to ask you on a date like a *gentleman.* And, well technically, you should probably say no because I'm, well, *me.* And you're…well, *you.”*

“Might want to work on your sales pitch,” Seungmin added from the peanut gallery.

But Hyunjin ignored him. “But I'm supposed to beg you for a date and you're supposed to say yes because you pity me and I'm supposed to like, pick you up and bring you flowers and take you to dinner or a movie or like, fucking *Paris!* Anything that will sweep you off your feet and make you think that maybe going out with me wasn't the worst idea in the world. And then I'm supposed to bring you home and walk you to the door and, and-”

“Jin,” Felix said, smile heavy in his voice. “You already did all of that. The dance? Remember?”

“Yeah but that was *different!*” Hyunjin insisted. He wasn't sure why he was trying to make this harder for himself but here he was, trying to convince Felix that he'd fucked the whole thing to before it had even started.

“You asked me to the dance so you wouldn't have to keep turning down your legions of fans.”

The blond rolled his eyes. “I mean yeah, that was a bonus I guess. But it was more of a cover than anything.”

“A…cover?”

It was like he was his own worst enemy while Felix was sitting next to him auditioning for captain of team Hyunjin.

“Yeah, a way to ask you out even if I was still too much of a scaredy cat to tell you I liked you.” Felix said it so matter of factly but Hyunjin saw the blush tinting his cheeks under his makeup.

There were moments like these where Hyunjin was reminded that not only was Felix a human with illogical fears and bashful blushes, but he wasn't all that different from Hyunjin himself.

He was soft hearted and romantic. He was nervous and new to all of this and probably just as desperate as Hyunjin was not to mess this up.

He was a boy who liked another boy who was afraid he was alone in it.

And Hyunjin wanted to prove to him that he wasn't.

He nodded once, taking this information in and smiling. “Okay so…a second date. Let me take you on a *second* date.”

That blush intensified on Felix's cheeks as he bounced a little in his seat. “Really?”

“Really. Friday night?”

The blond grinned and nodded enthusiastically. “Where are we going?”

“No idea yet,” Hyunjin answered honestly. “But I'll figure something out.”

Felix squirmed in excitement. “It's a date.”

*****

Dear diary,

It turns out that private flights to Paris are VERY expensive. Like, more than the price of selling a kidney; trust me, I checked. I'm also fairly certain that after that search I'm on several no fly lists so it's probably best to stay local for this date.

Because it's official: I HAVE A DATE WITH FELIX. An actual, romantic, more than friends, not just a scapegoat kind of date with the man of my dreams.

And assuming this isn't some elaborate coma dream, I need to plan the perfect date.

Hell, even if I AM in a coma, I might as well use the time to be productive and figure out just how I'm going to convince Felix that I'm like, adjacent to being worthy of him.

So while whisking him away on a romantic, international trip might be a bit outside of my budget, I still need to come up with something. Something that's fun but sweet and a little bit more than just sitting in my room and playing with clay.

I want it to feel special. And…I dunno, like…us?

Ughhhhh, it's so crazy to think of Felix and I as an US.

But I mean…we kind of are, right? Like…we always have fun together. Even if we're just studying or scrolling on Pinterest, working on vision boards. I'm pretty sure we could sit silently in a room and as long as Felix was happy, I'd have a blast.

It's like…when Lixie feels like he can be himself around me? It reminds me that I can also be myself. That, while I'm kind of a nervous wreck around him? He's also kind of my best friend. And I don't think I've ever been safer than I am when I'm with him.

And I really want Felix to feel that way too. Like he can be himself and be 100% safe.

Like kitten time but like…all the time.

Which…maybe that's actually the answer…

A date. That's personalized and special. Something that's US. Or whatever this new version of us is going to become. Something where we can both just be ourselves, without fear of judgement or rejection.

Okay, I need to do a little research.

Chapter End Notes

Oooo, we have a "real" date incoming, everyone! Will Hyunjin survive? STAY TUNED!!!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> Hello, hello!! I hope all of your are doing well! I want to start with a huge thank you for all of your support on this story! Life has been a little crazy for me lately but something about posting always feels very grounding to me and having my little bi-weekly chats with you all in the comments really puts a smile on my face, so thank you Alright, now who's ready to the first "real" date?? LET'S GOOOOO!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He had it all planned. He'd done his research, found the perfect place, bought tickets and told Felix to be ready at 10 am on Saturday morning, insisting that it was a surprise. And even when Felix pouted and asked with a pillowy bottom lip if Hyunjin would *pleeeaassseee* tell him, he'd stayed strong. He'd even narrowed down his outfit selections to only *seven* potential options.

All that was left to do was to shoot his shot.

Well, that and tell his parents.

Because while he was sure his parents would be just as excited as he was, there was a little part of his brain that worried his dad would look him up and down and say, “Really? *You?”* confirming that Felix was completely and totally out of his league.

Which yeah, duh, he fucking knew that. But his own parents were supposed to say stuff like *congratulations* or *be home by dinner* or like, *wow, that's totally not shocking, we always knew you had the potential to pull a baddie.*

Then again, if either of his parents ever referred to Felix as a baddie, he'd probably die on the spot.

Hyunjin took a deep breath, pulling himself from the useless swirl of thoughts. He forced his nervous knees to move, carrying him down the hall and toward their bedroom. It was Friday night and he'd dragged this out as long as possible.

He knocked on the door frame even though the door itself was cracked.

“Come in!” His dad called.

Hyunjin pushed the door open, looming on the doorway nervously, fidgeting with the hem of his sweater.

“Hey Bambi,” his mom chirped, emerging from *underneath* the bed, pulling a shallow plastic tub after her.

Hair rumpled and mostly fly-aways, she yanked the lid off and started to sort through the carefully folded blankets within. Old, overused quilts and cheap fluffy throws, all stored and waiting for the moment that autumn really took hold.

“Do you need any extra layers for your bed?” She asked, already pulling out her favorite quilt and placing it at the foot of her own bed.

Hyunjin shook his head. “I think I'm okay for now.”

She hummed, popping the lid back on with a satisfying snap and sliding it back under their bed.

“So what's up?” His dad asked innocently, eyes glued to the book of sudoku his pen was poised over.

Hyunjin stood, stalk still, unsure how he was supposed to break the news. It was good news, sure, but it still felt kind of earth shattering.

“I uh…I have a date tomorrow.” He nearly whispered it around the lump in his throat.

His father froze, eyes flicking up to stare into the distance like Hyunjin's words were printed over his dresser. His mother, meanwhile, simply nodded, sitting on the edge of the bed like it was just another casual Friday night.

“Oh Bambi, that's wonderful! Where are you and Lixie going?”

Hyunjin felt his brain stutter to a stop. “W-wait, you…that's it?”

It was his father who nodded, locked back in on his book. “Was there supposed to be more?”

Hyunjin’s eyes felt like they were going to fall out of his head. “I mean *yeah!* I tell you I have a date with a literal *angel* and you're acting like that's totally normal?”

It was his mom's turn to look confused. “Well I mean, you *did* go to

homecoming together. I sort of assumed this was next." She smiled almost conspiratorially. "I definitely *hoped* it was."

The brunette stood, swaying in the doorway, stunned. "But…b-but it's *Felix!"*

His mother nodded and without missing a beat responded, "And you're my son. My wonderful, kind, caring, handsome son who deserves someone as sweet and lovely as Felix."

She smiled sweetly at his wide eyes. "I think you two are good together. A perfect match."

A perfect match.

As much as Hyunjin truly believed that Felix had probably fallen from heaven and was slumming it with mere mortals for fun, there was also a smaller, just as genuine piece of his heart that recognized that he and Felix? They were good together.

It was the whole basis for the date he'd planned, after all.

But it was encouraging to know that someone else could see it too. And sure, that person was his mom who was kind of like morally obligated to believe he was worthy of greatness, but still.

It soothed a jagged little edge of his nerves and had him exhaling with something akin to peace.

"Yeah, I uh…I think so too." He said to his bare feet, toes flexing into the soft carpet to ground himself.

"Just let us know if you're not going to be home by dinner," his father added.

Hyunjin nodded easily.

"And have fun, Jin." His mom said, eyes glowing. "I can't wait to hear all about it when you get home." Her grin turned a little wicked as she added, "Well not *all* about it, I'm sure-"

"Ew mom, oh my god," Hyunjin said, cheeks flushing red as he turned to leave, his mom's laughter following him down the hallway.

*****

Hyunjin carefully unzipped his leather jacket to reveal the bouquet of flowers he'd picked up on the way over, relieved to find them only a little smooshed. He hadn't thought about the logistics of bringing your date flowers whilst *also* driving a motorcycle. When he'd realized that holding them against the handlebar would probably strip all the petals off his carefully selected bouquet of autumnal florals, he'd had to pivot. He'd carefully tucked them against his chest, zipping his jacket up around them and trying not to breathe too deep, lest he crush them between his body and his clothes. He'd probably looked ridiculous, riding his sleek black bike down leaf littered side roads, leather jacket, drenched in black…with flowers poking out of his shirt like the worst kept secret.

But hell, if he was trying to be himself today, there really wasn't anything more on brand than him being surrounded by flowers or doing something mildly embarrassing for the man he was crazy about.

So honestly? He was off to a pretty good start.

He straightened some of the bent stems, willing his hammering heart to slow a little bit. *You're allowed to be excited,* he reminded himself, *but let's not die before we ring the doorbell.*

He glanced one more time at his phone; he was perfectly on time. One last deep breath and he was finally ringing the doorbell.

The door *instantly* flew open, the blond behind it not even *trying* to pretend he hadn't been waiting on the other side.

"Jin Jin!" He cried excitedly, jumping forward to wrap Hyunjin in his arms, still bouncing on his toes.

"Hey Lixie," He chuckled, letting the smell of cheap, storebought peaches overwhelm him for a moment. Even in the chilly air of fall, he smelled like the dead of summer.

"Is this okay?" Felix asked, suddenly stepping back and posing to show off his outfit. It was casual. A thin white turtleneck with a chunky sweater layered over top. It was pale blue with big, fluffy clouds on it that matched his white jeans. He had platform converse that did very little to help him in the height department and an oversized navy blue bow holding half of his hair back in a half up, half down look.

“It’s perfect,” Hyunjin said with a smile. Felix could have walked out wearing a burlap sack and he would genuinely think he was fresh off the runway though, so he probably wasn’t the best person to ask. He was *highly* biased, after all.

But the blond sighed, like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. “Oh thank *god.* You have no idea how stressful it is to plan an outfit for a mystery date at a mystery location with no direction.”

“I mean, I said to dress casual and comfortable.”

Felix snorted like that was hardly enough and Hyunjin just smiled. “Do you have your helmet?”

That seemed to erase any left over sass the blond had. He instantly ducked to the side, producing a helmet that had apparently *also* been waiting in the wings.

“I was really hoping we’d go for a ride,” Felix said as he stepped outside and locked the door behind him.

Hyunjin nodded, leading him out to his bike. “Yeah, you mentioned at the dance that we should go for a ride again soon. And we’re getting close to winter when rides aren’t nearly as fun so…figured we should enjoy it while we can.”

The blond nodded enthusiastically, like he agreed wholeheartedly. Without further ado, he began to yank his helmet on, hairstyle be damned.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on,” Hyunjin chuckled, springing into action and easing the helmet gently over Felix's ears and the bow. “Wouldn't want to ruin your pretty hair.”

He swore he saw a blush crop up in Felix's cheeks under the helmet.

“I thought you said you weren't smooth.” Felix said, a throw back to a long ago conversation where Hyunjin had assured him early on that he was indeed, just a tall loser.

And yet, here they were.

“I'm not.” He said again. Because that hadn't changed. “I'm just honest.”

The blond giggled but let it go as they finally made their way to the

bike. Getting on felt almost routine, in the best way. Hyunjin threw his long leg over, pulling the bike up and off its kickstand. Felix waited somewhat patiently until Hyunjin nodded him over and the blond attacked the bike like it was a wild horse he needed to tame. If he'd been any bigger, it probably would have been hard to keep the bike upright while the kitten climbed into place.

Once the blond was breathless and settled, Hyunjin asked, "Ready?"

He could *feel* Felix's smile over his shoulder. "Ready!"

Hyunjin smiled to himself as he turned the key on the ignition because God, he loved his bike. And he's always loved how it could carry him anywhere, a journey for one. But the sound of it rumbling to life under him was so much better when it mixed with the shrieking laughter of a bubbly blond.

It felt a lot less like running away and a lot more like running *towards* something.

He slowly and carefully backed the bike out of the driveway, before steering them to the left and down the road.

They would have to go a few towns over to reach their destination so once they got out of the neighborhoods and sleepy streets of town, he increased the speed a little, speeding toward their adventure.

Felix was clinging to him like he was perfectly content. He melted around the corners with the bike like he'd been doing it all his life.

It was silly because it wasn't that Hyunjin had doubted that Felix liked the bike. But it was a totally different thing to *feel* it. To feel the way Felix's smile dug into the side of his neck when he turned his little nose inward. To feel the calm and steady breaths on his shoulder that only got faster when he giggled with joy and speed.

It made Hyunjin smile, leaning forward just a little to embrace the speed. And Felix just followed suit. Trusting Hyunjin's every move like he'd never even stopped to consider that things like high school romance usually ended in heartbreak.

Then again, neither had Hyunjin. Not even once.

The wide open road had long, gentle curves and short straights, winding them further and further from town. From anyone who knew them or who they were supposed to be.

Today they could be whoever they wanted.

And Hyunjin really just wanted to be a guy who was brave enough to hold Felix's hand.

Red, orange and yellow leaves fluttered down calmly around them, their fallen brothers kicking up wildly as the bike tore through patches of them littering the road.

It felt like a scene from a movie. Hyunjin just desperately hoped that movie was a romance.

Slowly but surely, the trees blended with houses and the houses turned to businesses. The buildings grew closer and closer together as nature slipped away, only to be found in nicely manicured pots and planters. The noises switched from chirping birds to the dull hum of early morning, small city traffic.

It wasn't much longer before Hyunjin was guiding the bike to the right and into a parking lot. He chose a spot in the far back corner and shut it off.

Felix ripped his helmet off, nearly taking his pretty bow with it despite all of Hyunjin's earlier warnings. Eyes wild, he searched for the surprise, which wasn't hard to find.

"Wait…the aquarium?"

Hyunjin nodded, twisting around to gauge the blond's reaction. He didn't seem *disappointed,* but he definitely seemed surprised.

"Yeah, I uh…well, I mean, dinner or a movie would have been fun. But I sort of wanted to do something a little different. And then I got to thinking about kitten time and how much fun we always have with that and, I dunno," He shrugged, praying to the heavens that he hadn't already made a fool of himself and wrecked his one chance. "I thought you might like the fish."

An excited little chitter slipped out of Felix, his ears perking instantly at the word. He blushed prettily and ducked his head like he hadn't meant for that to happen.

"Is that weird?" Hyunjin asked before he could stop himself.

But Felix sighed, almost dreamily and shook his head. "No Jin Jin, it's not weird. It's really fucking sweet."

A matching blush flooded Hyunjin's cheeks. "Yeah?"

The blond merely nodded, arms tightening back around Hyunjin's waist as he buried his face into his shoulder and muttered, "You really see me, don't you?"

It felt like he was pressing his words into Hyunjin's skin, straight through his leather jacket. Like he wanted to hide that question in a place only they could find.

"I mean…I really hope so." Hyunjin said, letting his hand rest lightly on top of the ones on his stomach. "I *want* to." he added.

The blond took a deep breath before whispering, "That makes me really happy to hear."

Before the brunette could figure out what to do next, Felix was straightening up and sliding off the bike, that familiar little spring to his step that meant he was excited.

"Well come on! Let's go see some fishies!"

Hyunjin chuckled and dismounted the bike. He carefully chained their helmets to it so they wouldn't need to lug them around with them and started to lead the way.

They'd made it maybe halfway through the parking lot when he felt little fingers slide between his own. He looked down to find Felix damn near skipping beside him, eyes sparkling in the morning sun.

"I haven't been to the aquarium since I was a little kid! We went for a field trip, one time. I think I was like eight or nine or something?"

"That sounds like a cool field trip."

"It was! I think the teachers were really annoyed with me though because we were supposed to be learning about the ocean and their habitats or whatever and I kept getting distracted."

He rolled his eyes but Hyunjin could imagine it so easily. A little Felix, running around, tail poofed up and excited as he chittered at every single thing behind the glass. God, his heart was full just *thinking* about it.

"Well today, you don't need to learn anything about their ecosystem or what they eat or things like that. Today? You can just enjoy."

The blond giggled, his grip tightening on Hyunjin's hand as he started to swing their clasped hands.

They made their way inside, still hand in hand as Hyunjin pulled out his phone so the employee could scan their tickets. She wished them a good day and suddenly, they were faced with so many options.

"Okay, salt water or fresh water first?" Hyunjin asked.

"Mmmm, fresh water!" Felix answered, tugging him in the direction the arrow pointed them at. "The salt water stuff sort of feels like a grand finale so we should save it for the end."

They stepped out of the main entrance hall into a smaller, darker hall. It glowed in this dreamy sort of way, blue water sparkling behind huge windows.

Hyunjin heard a little chitter escape from Felix as he was instantly tugged toward one of the tanks. As the blond watched a variety of sneaky, camouflage fish flit in and out of hiding, Hyunjin watched him.

His ears were standing straight up, on high alert and his eyes were endless pools of black. They stayed glued on the fish behind the glass, his entire body wound tight like he was going to pounce. His breathing was tight and fast, ready for attack. But a little smile lived on his lips, softening the edges of his frantic energy.

They moved from tank to tank, the blond thoroughly ignoring the plaques that described the type of fish they were looking at.

Eventually, his mind started to relax, his dilated pupils shrinking just a little bit. As if the thought suddenly hit him, he tilted his head and asked, "So why did you wanna come here so early?"

"I figured it wouldn't be as busy if we got here closer to opening. And if it was less busy then you'd feel more comfortable, ya know…being you. Fully."

Felix's excited kitten eyes drew back a little further, like his human side was taking the reins. He looked up at Hyunjin like he couldn't quite believe the words he'd just said.

"Well…what about you?" He finally asked, leaning his shoulder into Hyunjin's.

The brunette frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean like…you’ve planned this amazing, thoughtful date all so I could be myself. But what about you? I don’t want this date to be all about *me.”* He said, eyes open and honest. “I want it to be about *us.*”

There was that fucking word again. And god, it was so much sweeter when it came from Felix. To hear that word on his velvet voice? Hyunjin could die happy now.

“But it *is* about us.” He said, remembering the diary entry he’d written earlier this week in a full blown meltdown. “Because when you can be yourself? It makes me happy and it reminds me that I can do that too. That if you can be brave and trust me with your truth then I can do the same.”

It was a first date. He didn't want to go on and on about how Felix completed him, even if he thought it might be true. He didn't want to scare him off by telling him that he was the first person to make him feel safe enough to open up. But that was okay because if he did this right, there would be a second date. A third date with more chances to dive into the depths of his feelings and put words to them. Words backed my actions. And a fourth date and a fifth date where maybe he could think about using bigger words than *like*.

So he nudged Felix’s shoulder with his own and smiled. “Plus, you always look super cute when your kitten gets all excited.”

Felix giggled and flushed, nudging Hyunjin back. His other hand coming up to wrap around his forearms like holding hands simply wasn't enough contact anymore.

“Now come on,” Hyunjin said, pulling them forward. “This place is huge and we have a lot more to see.”

The blond followed Hyunjin readily, peeling off the second they saw a *huge* catfish swim past one of the North American themed enclosures.

Felix was running back and forth across the window, almost like he was stalking it. His tail had poofed back up, his ears on a swivel as he chittered at it. It almost looked like he was trying to communicate or something.

They meandered around, the crowds still thin this early in the morning, which was good because it gave Felix plenty of room to play. And Hyunjin? He was just enjoying the show.

The way Felix's blond hair glowed in the low lighting was almost surreal. It felt like they were on a different planet entirely, moving from room to room.

They emerged into a new space with tall ceilings and daylight streaming in. It was almost jarring after the cool darkness of the fresh water exhibits.

In the center of the room was a large, circular pool. A few children stood on the edges, gripping their parents hands and shrieking with delight at something in the water.

They made their way over, curious.

“Are they…you can *pet* a stingray?”

Hyunjin leaned further over the tank, eyes watching these beautiful creatures glide through the water. “Wow,” he breathed.

He suddenly wished he'd brought a sketchbook.

“Would you like to pet one?”

Hyunjin turned to find an employee beside him, smiling kindly and nodding toward the pool.

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

He nodded and gestured toward the water. “Alright, then just place two fingers in the water and wait for them to come to you. Be gentle. They can be shy creatures so you just need to be patient.”

Hyunjin nodded and placed his fingers just over the water, as instructed. The employee smiled and walked away to greet an approaching family.

“What if it stings you?” Felix asked, holding onto Hyunjin's arm like he wanted to hide behind him. He was viewing the water with trepidation, his ears dropping a little with worry.

The brunette chuckled,”I'm sure they wouldn't let you pet them if that was a major concern.”

The blond leaned a little further out, eyes dutifully watching.

It didn't take very long for a small stingray to swim over. It looked so effortless, how it slid through the water like it was nothing at all.

Hyunjin dipped his finger tips into the water and sure enough, the creature passed right underneath.

Felix gripped Hyunjin's arm tightly, like he was ready and prepared to rip Hyunjin away in case the animal attacked.

“What's it feel like? Is it slimy? I bet it's slimy,” Felix said, distrustful eyes on the pool and the next approaching stingray.

Hyunjin chuckled as another, larger stingray passed under his fingers. “No, not slimy. Not at all. It's soft.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Almost like…velvet or something.”

Felix hummed thoughtfully, his curiosity picking back up as he leaned closer to the water and watched several more stingrays swim passed.

They stood silently, Hyunjin letting these beautiful creatures glide by time and time again, trying to memorize the feel of them so he could attempt to draw it later.

“Sometimes, I wish I didn't hate water so much,”

The taller boy pulled his hand out of the water finally. He dried it carefully with the paper towels they had stationed around the pool and then ran his hand down the leg of his pants a few times for good measure.

“Yeah?” He asked, slowly starting to lead them away from the bright pool and back into the dark, wavey universe of the aquarium, following the signs for the salt water exhibits.

“Yeah,” Felix confirmed, his voice low and contemplative.

They're hands were loosely linked between them as they stepped through the threshold of the exhibit.

“I dunno, part of me just wants to feel normal I guess. But another part of me just thinks it would be nice to *not* loath showers.”

They rounded a corner and were hit by a *sea* of color. Bright coral and vibrant fish flooded the walls, all flitting from place to place in perfect harmony.

Hyunjin’s chuckle died in his throat as he stood, stunned. He'd seen

things like this in his science text books before but it was so incredibly different when it was real.

“Whoa,” he muttered, eyes wide.

He *really* wished he'd brought a sketchbook or some water colors or *something.*

But the real beauty was Felix.

He looked to his side to find the blond utterly entranced. His eyes were wide, but not that pure, playful black of earlier. It was something more akin to whatever Hyunjin was feeling, if he had to guess. He wondered if Felix ever thought about things like trying to record memories that would last forever.

He wondered if he'd want to keep this memory forever and, if so, exactly what parts made him feel that way. Was it the gorgeous wall of tropical fish? Was it the little adventure to a place he hadn't been to in a long time?

Would it be the fact that he was here with Hyunjin?

He tightened his hold on his hand, suddenly greedy. He wanted the day to last forever, so there would never be any chance that he or Felix would forget a single second.

They walked, almost in a daze. Felix spun around and around, dragging Hyunjin with him as he tried to take it all in. They marvelled in silence for what felt like hours as they made their way from tank to tank, room to room until they stepped into a tunnel surrounded by water.

It felt like being underwater entirely. Fish swam over their heads and alongside them, as if they didn't mind the intrusion. The glowing pattern is crystal clear water played over every surface, making it look almost like a mirage.

Hyunjin slowed his steps, hungry to make this last. This little insulated feeling where he and Felix were buried at the bottom of the ocean.

“Hey Jin?”

He stopped instantly at that soft tone. He looked down to find Felix gazing up at him. He looked unreal with the reflections playing over his face in silver waves. It was like sunshine drenched in watery

moonlight.

“Thank you. For today. It's been a lot of fun.”

Hyunjin waited patiently for the ‘*but’* because surely it was coming. Something that would resemble the classic, it's not you it's me cliche. Or maybe just a gentle backpedal by saying he was thankful to have a *friend* like Hyunjin.

But it didn't come.

Instead, Felix shuffled closer, biting his bottom lip and looking nervous. “I just can't believe you planned all this for *me.”*

At that, Hyunjin frowned in confusion. “Lix, it's just an aquarium and lunch. Which, yeah surprise, I thought we could get ramen after this?”

He'd seen stellar reviews for a place just a few blocks over.

And Felix's nervous smile grew wider and warmer. “But it's *not* just an aquarium and lunch, Jin. It's you listening to me and noticing me and learning about me from day one, all those months ago. And then it's you taking all of that and designing a day that's perfect for not just me, but *us.”*

Hyunjin felt a tug of pride in his chest. It felt good to know that Felix could *see* that. That he could *feel* it.

“You're just, you're always so *thoughtful.* And when I'm with you, I feel like you *see* me and you just…you get it. *Me.* And I just…I hope I can make you feel that way too.”

“You do, Lix.”

And god, he hoped one day, he'd figure out how to show him just how true that was.

The blond inched closer, head tipping back as they came chest to chest. His arms snaked around Hyunjin's waist loosely, almost like he wasn't sure it was allowed.

The gravity turned up a few notches and Hyunjin felt his spine sagging forward.

“I think you're the first person who's ever just let me be me without any questions. Without any judgement.”

Felix was drifting toward him, their faces moving closer and closer.

“You're just…you're incredible, Lix.” His words weren't untrue but they weren't enough either. He didn't know how to bottle up everything he was feeling into words. Not yet. Maybe not ever if his feelings just kept growing.

“Hey Jin Jin?”

“Yeah?” Hyunjin whispered, eyes getting lost in pools of dark chocolate.

“Can I kiss you?”

He barely nodded before feather soft lips landed on his. Light and forgiving, like they were giving him the option to change his mind.

But he didn't need that option. Not now, not ever.

His hands reached up to cradle his face carefully and pull him in. To show him that he didn't even need to ask. It was ridiculously attractive but Felix could kiss him anytime, any day and Hyunjin would be fucking honored.

He focused on trying to breathe but had it stolen away immediately when Felix sighed *into* him and pressed his lips back down. Firmer. More sure. *Real.*

Undeniably, unbelievably real. Because Hyunjin's mind would never be able to conceive such a heavenly feeling, not in a million years.

The low, distant sound of children broke their daze, reminding them that they were indeed in public. They broke apart but stayed close, Hyunjin's fingers tingling from the way they pressed against Felix's face.

“I uh…we should probably…” Felix trailed off, laughing awkwardly but holding Hyunjin's gaze despite his blush.

Hyunjin felt his smile break loose. “Are you hungry?”

The blond laughed and nodded. “Always.”

Hyunjin took a deep breath and leaned forward to press a kiss to Felix's forehead before giving his ear a playful tug. “Come on, let's go get some lunch.”

*****

“Do you think this place has cake?”

“Lix, it’s a ramen restaurant.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Hyunjin rolled his eyes playfully and carefully slurped his noodles. Upon second thought, taking his date to a ramen restaurant, where it was *impossible* to eat in a non-noisy way, was probably not his best plan.

But the blond didn’t seem to care in the slightest. He was thoroughly enjoying every single aspect of his ramen, picking up each element like he’d never seen it before. Felix truly could find joy in the littlest things and Hyunjin thought it might singlehandedly be his most attractive quality.

And that was saying a lot because good *god,* the heavens had given him a top tier face card.

“Ooo, you gotta try this! I think they said it was a quail egg?”

The blond used his chopsticks to place a tiny little egg in Hyunjin’s ramen without any hesitation. He’d been doing that since they’d sat down. For someone who had bitten his childhood best friend for trying to steal his food, he sure was in a sharing mood tonight.

“Well, you should try the pickled-oh don’t make that face.”

But it was too late. Felix’s nose had scrunched up at the very word. “The only thing that should be pickled, are *pickles.”* He said it with such conviction that you’d think he was reciting a bible verse.

Hyunjin chuckled and shook his head lightly. “Alright, but it’s *your* loss. More pickled beets for me then.”

Felix faked a gag before nailing him with a raised eyebrow and pouted lips. “You better not be trying to kiss me with nasty pickled beet breath later then.”

The brunette *immediately* dropped the one he’d captured between his

chopsticks. Delicious or not, it was *not* worth the loss of his new found privilege.

Felix giggled, reaching across the table to lay a hand on top of his like it was a totally normal thing they just did now.

They finished their meals, fingers resting lightly against one another the entire time. And by the time Hyunjin had paid and they were walking back to the bike, it was starting to set in that the date was almost over. Just a long ride back to Felix's house to drop him off and then an excruciatingly long weekend where Hyunjin knew his mind would inevitably try to convince him that he'd screwed it all up.

"When did you first figure out that you liked me?"

The taller man stumbled over nothing, feeling Felix's hand tighten around him. "I uh, what?"

The blond giggled, completely unphased. "Come on Jin, tell me. When did you realize that you had a crush on me?"

God, he hoped it wasn't creepy but he didn't want to lie either. He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, grimacing lightly. "Um, honestly?"

"No, please lie." Felix deadpanned.

Hyunjin snorted despite his nerves and just decided to go for it. "The first time I saw you."

There was a single second, so brief Hyunjin almost missed it, where Felix froze. Almost like he hadn't been expecting that answer. Which was ridiculous because Hyunjin knew he'd probably done a terrible job hiding it.

"The very first time?"

The brunette nodded.

"Like, in the cafeteria?"

He nodded again.

"But you didn't even *know* me yet."

To this, Hyunjin just shrugged. "Yeah but you were really cute. And I *wanted* to know you." He pulled the blond around the corner, the

parking lot coming into view. “I can’t really explain it but I’d never felt that kind of pull to someone before.”

He’d had crushes from afar before but they’d been dull and lackluster compared to the overwhelming gravity he felt towards Felix.

He felt the soft brush of fur on his wrist and found Felix’s tail trying to worm its way in between them.

“It was like that for me too,” he said, eyes glancing up at Hyunjin.

“Really?”

The blond nodded readily, like he didn’t even need to consider his answer. “Yeah. I uh, I saw you in the parking lot that morning. On the bike. And I might have, sort have…run to Chan? To see if he knew anything about a new kid starting? And when he said that he was supposed to show someone around that morning, I asked if he could introduce us.”

“But why?” Hyunjin asked, feeling giddy and confused in the same breath.

But Felix just threw his head back and whined, “Oh my god, because you were so *hot,* okay?”

Hot.

That was a word that he wasn’t sure anyone had ever applied to him. At least, not to his face, that was for sure.

“I-I, um okay wow, I-me? Really?”

The blond giggled and tightened his hold as they neared the bike. “Yup!” He said merrily, popping the p on the end.

The brunette could *feel* himself starting to disassociate before a very obvious follow up question dawned on him. “I mean, surely my personality ruined that, right?”

Felix threw his head back and laughed. It was full bellied and deep but so fucking joyful. He sounded part relieved and part fond when he shook his head and said, “Absolutely not. Kind of just made you even hotter, to be honest.”

Hyunjin felt his cheeks go up in flames. He probably should have said something like ‘*thank you’* or ‘*wow, I’m so flattered’* but instead, the

words that came out of his mouth were, “We must have different definitions of hot then.”

“Oh yeah?” Felix countered, grabbing his helmet as Hyunjin handed it over and holding it in front of his chest with a smug look on his face. “Well my definition is tall guys who wear leather jackets and look like they are really into punk rock but secretly know all the names of the flowers in your mother’s garden.”

Hyunjin narrowed his eyes, lips pursed. “Oddly specific definition.”

The blond merely shrugged, trouble in his eyes. “Well what’s your definition?”

Hyunjin knew he should probably screen his answer first. Think about it carefully and tread lightly but goddammit, they were never going to be able to date if he couldn’t start letting his guard down. “Short blond bombshells who write all their notes in rainbow gel pen and have a collection of keychains on their backpack that you can hear from a half mile away.”

The blond’s eyes went wide, like he hadn’t been expecting Hyunjin to play along and was *wildly* excited about it.

Using his momentum, Hyunjin reached into his jeans pocket. “Speaking of, I got this for you at the gift shop when you went to the bathroom.”

He unfurled his fingers to reveal a little fish keychain. A little stingray made of a velvety texture that almost felt like the real thing.

“Now you can pet one too.” He said, holding it out by the key ring and letting it dangle in front of Felix’s face.

The kitten blinked once, his smug smile evaporating as he gazed at it with wide eyes. He looked a little stunned, like the tone shift had completely taken him off guard.

“I…for me?”

Hyunjin nodded, dropping it into Felix’s hand when he set his helmet on the ground by his feet. “Yeah. I wanted to get you something too, ya know…remember our first date.”

The blond’s shoulders melted a little as he cradled the keychain in his palms like it was some precious artifact. “Jin Jin,” He muttered, voice

thick with some kind of emotion that sounded warm and caring.

He pulled it close, clutching it to his chest. He looked up with a smile and determination in his eyes. “Come here.” He said simply, reaching one hand up to Hyunjin’s face and stretching up onto his tiptoes.

“But the pickled beets-”

“Oh shut up,” Felix laughed before pressing their lips together. Hyunjin could *feel* his smile and god, that curve felt so nice against his own.

The blond dropped back down to his flat feet, breaking the kiss, and stared with admiration at the cheap little souvenir. “It’s going right on my backpack when I get home!” He declared proudly, scooping his helmet off the ground.

Hyunjin smiled to himself, pulling his own helmet on and mounting the bike. Felix cuddled in close, wasting no time at all in wrapping his arms around Hyunjin's waist and leaning his helmeted head on his leather clad shoulder.

The bike started with that familiar rumble that never failed to make Hyunjin smile and the blond behind him giggle with excitement.

They rode home, Hyunjin taking a longer, more scenic route just to work out a little more time with Felix. He had some assignments he needed to work on and he'd promised his mom he'd help her deep clean the kitchen, otherwise he'd be scheming to get horribly lost and not return Felix for at *least* a few more hours.

But for some strange, rude reason, the rest of the world hadn’t stopped spinning when Felix had said yet to their date. Hyunjin still had things to do, responsibilities to attend to and many, *many* hours of daydreaming about Felix and how gorgeous he'd looked in the silvery blue light of the water.

After a trip roughly twice as long as the one into the city, Hyunjin finally pulled the bike back into Felix’s drive way, this knot sinking like a stone in his stomach. Was it pitiful to tell him he'd miss him?

He shut the bike off and pulled his helmet off as Felix climbed off the back and did the same. The brunette stayed seated, convinced if he stood, his feet would carry him inside after the blond with or without his consent.

“Would you want to come in?” Felix asked, eyes looking hopeful as he rocked back on his feet.

Hyunjin felt his heart thump sadly in his chest. He ached to reach out, maybe thread some hair being his ear or cup his cheek but that felt too tempting. So instead, he gripped the helmet he had balanced in front of him on the gas tank and smiled back at Felix with a sad little tilt.

“I would but I promised my mom I would help with some chores around the house today.”

Felix pouted playfully. “Booooo,” he said before his lips perked up a little. “It's sweet of you to help her out though.”

“Oh, I'm about 99% sure this has less to do with her needing actual help than the fact that she wants to interrogate me about our date.”

The fact that his mother had *randomly* decided that she *needed* the oven scrubbed thoroughly, immediately after his date felt like a pretty flimsy excuse to him and way too perfectly timed.

Felix giggled, seemingly delighted by that. “Oh? And what will you say?”

Hyunjin paused, really trying to put into words how he felt about today.

“I'll tell her that you looked gorgeous.” He finally said, nodding because the words felt right. He stared off into the distance, searching for the words. “And I'll tell her we had a lot of fun, just like we always do. And…I'll probably tell her that I really, *really* like you, even though she already knows.”

He paused again, knowing he could probably talk about Felix forever. So instead he just smiled, deciding to wrap it up with, “and I'll probably tell her that I really hope I can get a second date.” He finally looked back at Felix to find the blond blushing madly, his ears twitching like the sweetness of the words was too much to handle.

“Oh Jin Jin,” he said, stepping forward to place a hand on the side of his face. “Of course you get a second date.”

He said it so matter of factly that it soothed any remaining jagged edges of doubt as Hyunjin leaned into his little hand with a hum.

“Yeah?”

Felix nodded, his face drifting closer. “Yeah.” His smile lasted as his lips came to hover right over Hyunjin's. “But I get to plan that one.”

Hyunjin giggled into the kiss, feeling giddy. He felt *cherished.*

The kiss was long and simple, loath to part.

But when they did, it was with tiny pecks and little pouts. It felt so overwhelmingly ridiculous but Hyunjin fucking loved it.

“See you on Monday?” He finally asked as Felix took a step back, helmet carefully stowed away under his arm.

He nodded. “Text me?”

Hyunjin nodded.

“Like…a lot.” Felix said with a cheeky smile.

“Okay Lix, I'll text you a lot.”

“Promise?” The blond asked playfully, taking a step back but not turning yet as Hyunjin pulled his helmet back on and fastened it.

“Promise.”

The blond nodded, seemingly content with it. He gave the little finger wave that never failed to make Hyunjin's heart flutter and finally turned to run up his steps.

Hyunjin started his bike and quickly pulled out his phone to shoot off a very important message.

Hyunjin [3:12 PM]

Miss you already

He caught a glimpse of Felix smiling like a mad man at his phone before walking his bike back out to the road and taking off.

Chapter End Notes

I'd say Jin Jin did a VERY good job AND, next chapter?? We get even more Hyunlix cuteness alongside some friend group shenanigans and dramatic Jisung see you on Sunday!

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> Hello and happy Sunday!! Sorry for the later than usual update; you all can thank my SKZ besties for not so subtly reminding me in the group chat that I hadn't posted yet Full disclosure, I didn't proof read this chapter yet but I am on a ROLE with writing the new story so I'll come back later and clean it up lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear diary,

I am officially dating Felix.

I AM OFFICIALLY LEE FELIX'S BOYFRIEND!!!

If the thought of yelling it out from the rooftops didn't give me secondhand embarrassment just THINKING about it, I would. Because holy fucking shit.

I kind of keep expecting to wake up or to find out it's like one of those classic teen movies where Felix bet his friends that he could make the local freak popular or something, but it's not.

I know, I straight up asked him.

He assured me that he didn't have the energy for that level of deceit because he wasn't Minho and I have to say, I believe him.

But let me back up because I feel like I should explain HOW we became official because oh my god, it's the cutest thing EVER. Like, I'm going to melt just thinking about it.

So the weekend after our first date, Felix asked ME out (crazy, I know) and he took me to a painting class! We were given canvases and all the paints and just followed along with the instructor. It was pretty easy but it was really fun and Felix seemed to have a blast, which made it even better.

So then, I took him home and I was dropping him off and he asked me if we could officially be boyfriends now that we'd gone on not one but TWO

dates and oh my god, he was so fucking cute. He looked all shy, like the thought I'd say no or something and fuck, it just made me want to hug him and kiss him but before I could even say ANYTHING, he told me that, and I quote, according to the very real and very sacred boyfriend rules he'd written when he was like six, we were boyfriends.

So I laughed and I kind of thought he was joking and was like, oh yeah? Boyfriend rules? AND DO YOU KNOW WHAT HE DID NEXT?? HE WENT INSIDE AND GOT THEM! HE HAD FUCKING RECEIPTS!!!

I have never, ever, ever in my life, met someone as fucking precious as that man.

I'm obsessed with him. I think about him first thing in the morning and right before I fall asleep. He texts me constantly and he's always wanting to hold hands in the hall like I'm not some stain on his reputation and he gives me a kiss on the cheek before we go to class.

He makes everything fun, even calculus. And every Sunday night, all I can think about is how I want to see him, standing next to our lockers and calling me Jin Jin and saying good morning like he hasn't seen me in years.

And next weekend? Next weekend, the whole group is going to get together for another sleepover. Which means at the end of the night? I don't have to say goodbye.

*****

“I'm not sure a sleepover is a good idea.”

Hyunjin blinked a few times, sure that he's misheard his mother. “You…huh?”

She grimaced, seemingly pained by it. “I said I don't think a sleepover is a good idea.”

The words simply didn't make sense. The last time he'd been invited to a sleepover, his mom had been over the *moon.* Hell, she'd even offered to *host.* But now she was shuffling in her spot, looking uncomfortable and regretful.

“A-am I in trouble?”

His mother hurriedly shook her head. “No, no, of course not, Bambi. It's just…I'm not sure…” she trailed off, looking desperately to her husband for help.

He set his cup of tea down calmly and folded his hands with gentle care. “I'm not sure it's *appropriate.”*

“Yes, exactly.” Hyunjin's mom affirmed, looking grateful for the guidance.

“Appropriate?” The brunette echoed, frowning around the word. “But, I thought you liked Chan and Binnie?”

“I do. They're lovely, sweetheart.”

“And Jeongin. You and him for along really well. And listen, I know Seungmin can be a bit, well frankly, terrifying but -”

“No, Jin that's that it. Really, I love your friends, I do-”

Hyunjin's frown deepened. He's never had to do this before. He's never been barred from his friends before. Mainly because he's never *had* friends before but still.

“Then I just, I don't understand! Everyone will be there and I don't want to be the only one who isn't!”

He didn't want to go back to quiet, lonely Saturday nights. He didn't want to show up to lunch on Monday and not get all the new inside jokes. He didn't want to be alone again.

“I don't understand why you were so excited last time but suddenly you seem so against it!”

“Because,” his mom finally said, her lips pursed like watching him spiral was painful. “Last time, your *boyfriend* wasn't there.”

He froze when he heard that word. He always did. Partially because he was waiting for the camera crew to jump out and reveal it had all been a prank after all. But partially because every time he heard that word, he had this knee jerk reaction to deny it; him? A *boyfriend*? Psh. But then he's remember that he did indeed have a boyfriend. A beautiful, perfect, dreamy, smiley, giggly, cute as a button boyfriend and he'd get a little lost in the thought of him.

“Felix was there,” he defended weakly.

“Yeah but you two weren't dating then,” his dad said, matter of factly.

And to that, Hyunjin had to pause because oh. It was like *that.*

“And I know you're a good kid, Jinnie and it's not that we don't trust you,” his mother rushed to add. “It's just, you're eighteen, with your first boyfriend and the *hormones-”*

“Oh my god, mom please stop talking.” Hyunjin's face was bright red. He hardly even let himself think of Felix like that. He didn't need his *mother* bringing it up.

“I know it's awkward hon, it is for me too.” She said, her own cheeks tinged red like she truly meant it. “But as your parents, it's our job to set boundaries and…stuff.”

Hyunjin's had never required much discipline and it showed in his mother's inability to finish her sentence eloquently.

He took a deep breath and looked to his mom, over to his dad and back again. “So…what? Does that mean I just…can't go to sleepovers anymore?”

He could fucking *see* his mom's heart breaking as his father frowned deeply. He looked like he didn't like that answer one bit.

“How about this?” His mom finally said, snapping her fingers as the lightbulb went off over her head. “Can Lixie give me his mom's number? Maybe she and I can discuss and find a way to make this work.”

Hyunjin had to admit, his mom meeting the inlaws this early was a little fast for him but it was probably his best bet at avoiding a complete ban on group activities.

“Let me text, Lix.” He offered, pulling his phone out of his pocket to send a completely casual text message to his boyfriend.

Hyunjin [5:55 PM]

CODE RED! CODE RED! MY PARENTS ARE THREATENING TO BAN ME FROM ALL SLEEP OVERS UNLESS MY MOM CAN TALK TO YOUR MOM

Hyunjin [5:56 PM]

Can you please send me her number?!?

Felix, bless his chronically online soul, answered almost immediately.

Lixie💕 [5:58 PM]

WHAT?! Banned from sleepovers??

Lixie💕 [5:58 PM]

They can't do that! You're 18, you're a legal adult

Lixie💕 [5:59 PM]

You could sue

Lixie💕 [5:59 PM]

OR that other thing? What's it called?

Lixie💕 [5:59 PM]

EMANCIPATION!!!

Hyunjin had to bite his lip to hold in his laugh. These were serious times and his boyfriend was attempting to go to bat for him. Sure, he was flailing wildly but damn, he was cute doing it.

Hyunjin [6:00 PM]

Let's start with your mom's number before we jump straight to legal action

He could fucking *hear* the eye roll from here.

Lixie 💕 [6:02 PM]

Ugh 555-272-1122

Lixie💕 [6:03 PM]

I'll start my research just in case 🔪

Lixie💕 [6:04 PM]

They will NOT deprive me of my Jin Jin cuddles 😡

Hyunjin tried his best to hide his melting heart as he relayed the number to his mom.

She wasted no time, immediately punching it in and holding the phone up to her ear. Hyunjin heard an overly friendly hello that was roughly an octave higher than it should be as she walked out of the room, leaving he and his dad in the wake.

They stood in silence, awkwardly awaiting some kind of verdict about Hyunjin's chastity or something.

God, he really should have seen this coming. But he sort of figured when he finally got a boyfriend, he'd be like 40 and living outside of his parents home so it wouldn't be as big of a deal.

His father cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. “So uh…so you have any questions?”

Hyunjin blinked. “About…?”

His dad sighed deeply like he wanted the floor to swallow him while. “About sex.”

“Oh my god-”

“-I may not know all the details of um, of male on male intercourse but I'm sure some of the mechanics-”

Hyunjin hurriedly shoved his fingers into his ears. “Stop. Please, please stop talking a-about *mechanics,* holy shit.”

He saw his dad raise his hands in surrender and when he didn't see his lips move, he slowly pulled his fingers out, letting the dull, awkward hum of the kitchen flood back in.

“I just…I'm here for you. If you need to. As your father, it's kind of my job.”

Hyunjin took a deep breath, reminding himself that as *mortifying* as it was? It was always really amazing to have parents who gave a shit. Who clearly did not want to have this conversation either but offered it anyways.”

“I know.” Hyunjin said softly, cheeks still sizzling with red as he rubbed the back of his neck. “And I appreciate it but…Felix and I *just* started dating. And we haven't…like, there's, it's…it's not…”

What? It's not on his radar yet? He's never thought about it? Never considered it? Never dreamed about it? That would be a big fat lie.

But he'd rather die than tell his dad he had fantasies about Felix. So instead, he took a deep breath and let it all out in a rush. “It's just, we're not there yet.” That felt more truthful. “But I appreciate it. Really.”

He forced himself to meet his dad's eyes as they shared a nod of agreement. Conversation over, at least for now.

They had finally lapsed back into a less tense silence when Hyunjin's phone vibrated in his hand.

Lixie [6:11 PM]

Wait, so why are your parents anti sleepover all of a sudden??

He stared at that message longer than he should have. Because he could just say he didn't know, but that would be a lie. And if Felix's mom was anything like his, she'd probably be attempting the birds and the bees conversation later.

He cleared his throat, trying to sound nonchalant and utterly failing when he told his dad, “I uh, I-I’m going to uh…use the restroom. I'll be back.”

He scurried out of the room under his thinly veiled excuse and nearly ran up the stairs, heart pounding.

He was in no way ready to have this conversation with literally anyone, let alone Felix. The topic of sex had never been broached between them and secretly, Hyunjin had sort of assumed that Felix would ask Hyunjin to refrain from any and all impure thoughts until *after* the wedding.

But here he was, his own fucking *mother* of all people, forcing his hand.

He crept down the hall and into the bathroom, apparently committing to the ruse as he closed the door and leaned back against it.

He stared at his phone screen for long enough that Felix followed up.

Lixie💕 [6:18 PM]

Did your parents finally find out that Seungmin is a bad influence?

Hyunjin bit his lip, nerves sizzling under his skin as he typed and retyped his reply. He finally settled on something simple.

Hyunjin [6:21 PM]

Surprisingly no 😳 they're more concerned about my boyfriend actually…

There was a single second before his phone lit back up.

Lixie [6:21 PM]

…Your boyfriend???

Lixie [6:21 PM]

ME?!?!?

Lixie [6:22 PM]

THEY'RE CONCERNED ABOUT ME?!?!

Lixie [6:22 PM]

Do they not like me?! Did I offend them somehow? I swear I didn't mean too!

Lixie [6:23 PM]

Serious question: do you think your parents could get bought with brownies??

Lixie [6:23 PM]

I'm not kidding Hyunjin, I will be there in less than an hour if I have to

Okay, perhaps simple had been a little too vague.

Hyunjin quickly typed out a reply, trying to staunch the bleeding he'd

caused.

Hyunjin [6:23 PM]

Oh my god, Lix they fucking LOVE you, promise

Hyunjin [6:24 PM]

That's not what they're concerned about

He could almost *feel* the sigh that happened across town.

Lixie 💕 [6:25 PM]

Well then what ARE they concerned about???

Hyunjin took a deep breath, sending a silent prayer to the heavens that he didn't spontaneously combust upon sending this text.

Hyunjin [6:26 PM]

They're concerned that I'd be staying the night with my boyfriend

Hyunjin [6:27 PM]

And that we might, ya know

Hyunjin [6:28 PM]

Do what boyfriends do…

He held his breath after hitting send, very tempted to throw his phone across the room and run. But that wouldn't be fair to Felix. Theoretically, they were in this together.

Hyunjin's phone went ominously silent. After the near constant messages, it felt almost eerie.

Maybe Felix was just as stunned as Hyunjin had been when his mom had brought it up. Maybe he was blushing and not sure how to respond. Maybe he was currently gagging, thinking about Hyunjin naked and anywhere near him.

Finally, after what felt like a small century, Felix responded.

Lixie 💕 [6:32 PM]

OH

Lixie 💕 [6:33 PM]

Wow

Lixie 💕 [6:33 PM]

□□□

But what did that *mean?*

Giggling, blushing emojis?

That probably wasn't bad but *what the fuck?!* Hyunjin didn't know what to do with this response!

Would it be rude to just ask? Be like, *hey so does this mean you wouldn't be totally opposed to sleeping with me someday?*

And if the answer was no? Well then he supposed it would be less embarrassing to cry alone in this bathroom then in front of the blond himself.

But what if the answer was *YES?!*

Goddammit, he'd been trying *so hard* not to think about this stuff and yet it seemed like every single person he knew was conspiring against him.

A knock sounded on the door, right behind him, nearly making him jump out of his skin.

“You alright in there?” His dad's anxious laugh made Hyunjin feel almost guilty for hiding away to have a mini meltdown for so long.

“Y-yeah. I'm good,” he said in a croaky voice that certainly did not sound good.

He opened the door, phone stowed back into his pocket and his dad had his hands shoved in his jean pockets.

“Your mom wants to talk to you. She talked to Felix's mom and we've all agreed on some ground rules. If you agree to them, you can have your sleepover.”

A spark of hope bloomed in Hyunjin's chest. He nodded dutifully, determined to do whatever it took.

*****

He nearly regretted that decision when he found himself vehemently begging his mom not to construct a balloon arch for the sleep over he was now *hosting*.

Rule number one to having a sleepover with your group of friends that included your boyfriend? It had to be hosted at either his or Felix's house. For “supervisory reasons”. Which sure was probably a small sliver of the reason this was happening. But based on the feral smile his mom was shining on the platter of deviled eggs she was adding garnish too, he had a feeling it had *much* more to do with her life long dream of Hyunjin having friends.

“Mom, we really don't need all this food. Most of them will probably bring their own snacks anyway.”

“Oh hush, there's no such thing as too much food,” she said

dismissively, running over toward the oven to check on the cookies she was baking.

Hyunjin sighed, already accepting defeat. His mom was sort of like a train barreling down the tracks; once she got started, she was hard to stop.

Plus, the guys were going to start showing up any second now so unless he was going to try to *hide* the party sized bowl of cheese puffs his mom had on the island, he really didn't have another option. He was also pretty sure that Changbin would never forgive him if he found out he's hidden cheese puffs from him.

The doorbell rang, causing Hyunjin's spine to stiffen and his mom's smile to go from crazed to maniacal. She ripped her apron off, smoothing her sweater before whirling around to point an authoritative finger at her son.

“Now remember, the door stays open.”

That was rule number two to having a sleepover that included his boyfriend.

“Mom, there will be six other people there,” he muttered, fighting back his blush at the mere *thought* of him and Felix behind a closed door.

She merely narrowed her eyes. “Exactly. So no funny business.”

Hyunjin sighed, wishing he could just evaporate. It would be so much easier to just be floating in the air, not beholden to new rules designed to protect his innocence.

It was funny, really. If his parents thought about it for even a single second, they would have noticed that he had natural protection built in due to his severe lack of game and his crippling anxiety regarding almost any form of human interaction, even less complex ones than sex.

But alas, here he was, following his mom down the hallway like he was facing the gallows and not a night full of video games, junk food and probably half a dozen manicures.

His mom threw the door open with a flourish. Her face lit up like a super nova as she announced, “Welcome!”

Felix flung himself forward, hugging her like they were only friends while Chan smiled from behind him, asking if it was okay that he parked in the driveway.

But Felix's hug was brief (by his standards) as he let go and *ran* toward Hyunjin with a steady stream of “Jin, Jin, Jin, Jin, Jin!”

He hugged Hyunjin like he hadn't seen him less than 24 hours ago.

“Jin Jin!” He cried once more, his arms tightening around Hyunjin's waist like he wanted to occupy the same space at the same time.

“H-hey Lixie,” Hyunjin wheezed, hyper cognizant of his mom being *right there* and determined to keep him a virgin until he died apparently.

But her and Chan were merely giggling behind their hands and rolling their eyes like they'd expected nothing less.

So Hyunjin carefully returned the hug, suddenly glad he hadn't evaporated back in the kitchen because steam didn't get cute boyfriends and long, spine cracking hugs.

“Missed you,” Felix muttered against his chest and goddammit, Hyunjin *melted.*

“Missed you too, Lix.”

And the crazy part was that he wasn't even lying. Time away from Felix, even minimal, felt so colorless. So dull and boring and God, how had he survived before Felix?

“Hey! Leave room for Jesus!”

“Oh shut up, they're adorable!”

Hyunjin finally pulled back enough to see Seungmin rubbing his shoulder and shooting daggers at Jeongin who was smiling widely at his mom and greeting her warmly.

They dragged their bags in after them, Chan finally beckoning Felix over to help move his bags inside. The blond grumbled like it was a massive inconvenience but disconnected from Hyunjin moodily. He lugged a bag that was far too large for a single night's stay in after him and dramatically wiped his forehead free of sweat after.

Hyunjin’s mom giggled, endlessly charmed by him as his father

rounded the corner to find a gaggle of young men in his front room. He offered a shy little wave, pushing his glasses higher up his nose and nodding politely.

“Hi Jun-Ho!” Felix chirped immediately, dropping his duffle again and running over to give him a hug. Hyunjin watched as his dad smiled, wrapping his arms around Felix’s shoulders gently.

“Oh!” The blond said, springing back and racing back over to his bag. “I brought brownies!” He shot Hyunjin a very non-subtle wink that had the brunette biting his lip to hold his giggle in. Something about Felix desperately wanting to impress his parents was unbearably sweet.

“Brownies?!” Jisung’s voice shrieked from the still open doorway. Thank god, they didn’t have any pets; they would have escaped long ago with them all leaving the open door unmanned.

“Gimme!” Jisung cried, lunging forward only to be snagged by the collar and pulled back by an eye rolling Minho.

“Jiji, at least introduce yourself first.”

“Seriously Ji, how many times do we have to remind you to say hello before you ambush a person?” Changbin said, shoulders and back loaded up with what appeared to be all of Minho’s, Jisung’s and his own bags.

Hyunjin had to chuckle, remembering the first time he’d ever met Jisung and how the little brunette had eagerly asked if he could touch his eyebrow piercing.

Jisung at least had the decency to look a little chagrined as he ducked his head and twisted his mouth into an embarrassed little smile.

“Oh um, hi! I’m Jisung!” He said cheerily, approaching Hyunjin’s mom with an outstretched hand.

Hyunjin’s mom was just delighted to meet yet *another* friend of her son’s. “Oh, it’s so nice to meet you! And you must be Minho?” She asked, peaking over Jisung’s shoulder to view his stoic counterpart.

Minho nodded with a soft smile and offered his own handshake.

“Thank you so much for tutoring Hyunnie, we really appreciate it.” She said enthusiastically, shaking his hand with far too much

excitement, like she was meeting a celebrity.

“It’s no problem, really.” He assured her easily before walking over to greet Jun-Ho, dragging his boyfriend after him.

With all the introductions done and the entire gang assembled, Hyunjin’s mom clasped her hands in front of her chest and beamed at the group.

“Alright! Before I leave you boys to your own devices, bathroom is down the hall, to the left. There are snacks in the kitchen and plenty of them, so please feel free to eat as much as you want. Jun-Ho and I will be upstairs but if you need anything, just let us know, sound good?”

A chorus of *yes ma’am’s* answered her, making her smile even wider at how polite all of Hyunjin’s friends were. He had to admit, he was really proud to be standing amongst them, especially as Felix floated back over to his side, leaning his head against his arm like he simply *had* to touch him.

“Have fun!” His parents called before ascending the stairs. Hyunjin was pretty sure he wouldn’t see his dad until tomorrow but he had a feeling his mom would find plenty of *‘reasons’* to check on things downstairs throughout the night.

The second they were gone, Jisung was running up to Hyunjin with a look that spelled trouble. “Jin, I want you to pierce my eyebrow.”

“I-I, what?” he stuttered, completely caught off guard.

“Come on, Jinnie!” Jisung whined, immediately switching to pouting. “It’s classic sleepover stuff! And yours is so cool! I want one too.”

“Okay, *face piercings* aren’t ‘*classic sleepover stuff’,”* Jeongin sassed, crossing his arms and cocking his hip to the side.

But Jisung seemed to find this logic more annoying than anything so he just brushed it off and focused back in on Hyunjin. “Please Jin? Pleeeaaasseee,”

Felix shoved Jisung back with narrowed eyes. “Keep your gross puppy dog eyes away from my boyfriend.” He said with a hair flip.

Minho snorted and slipped a hand around Jisung’s waist, getting his attention. “Don’t pressure him, Jiji.”

But the pout was back in an instant. “I’m not! He doesn’t mind, right Jin?”

Hyunjin rubbed the back of his neck anxiously. He didn’t want to let him down but he also didn’t really want to potentially ruin his face with a failed piercing.

“I just, I don’t think I’m qualified, Jisung.” He said honestly. “I didn’t even pierce my own eyebrow, I went to a shop for that.”

It had taken *months* of begging his parents but eventually they’d caved on his seventeenth birthday as a way to soften the blow of yet another move.

“Oh,” Jisung said, realization setting in as he deflated ever so slightly.

“But,” Hyunjin said, sudden inspiration hitting. “I *did* pierce my own ears.”

Jisung’s fingers immediately went to his earlobes, like he was trying to imagine feeling metal underneath.

“So, if you wanted…I could do that.” The prospect of an ear piercing didn’t scare him nearly as much as something next to his friend’s fucking *eye*.

Jisung’s eyes started to sparkle as a smile spread. “Yeah. Let’s do it!”

Hyunjin smiled back, already thinking about the earrings he could give him as a starter pair before Changbin cleared his throat.

“Before you two start playing surgeon or whatever, can we please investigate those snacks your mom mentioned?”

“Surgeon? What do you think happens at hospitals?” Seungmin asked as Hyunjin started to lead the boys back to the kitchen.

Upon discovering the veritable *feast* his mother had prepared, Changbin nearly broke into tears. He immediately ran back to the stairs to *yell* a thank you up towards his parents before racing back and shoving Chan away from the plate of cookies he was approaching.

They gorged on snacks while the conversation ping ponged from topic to topic. Jisung kept asking Hyunjin if the piercing would hurt, like he thought the answer might change if he asked enough. Changbin was

working his way through each dish, tasting each one like there would be a test later while Seungmin stared him down with poorly hidden amusement at his actions. Jeongin was chatting with Chan, asking for some advice on his squat form and Minho was floating around, eyes continually falling back to Jisung like the lovesick puppy he pretended not to be.

After a good thirty minutes, Changbin had loaded up a thick paper plate with at least one of everything, declaring with a mouth full of popcorn that it was time to get this party started.

Hyunjin raided the fridge, grabbing sodas and drinks for everyone before everyone collected their pile of bags and lugged them up the stairs. Felix fearlessly lead them toward Hyunjin's bedroom like he was completely at home here.

Sure enough, when they all piled into Hyunjin's room, Felix threw his duffle in the corner, digging out the donut toy Hyunjin bought him so long ago now, and made a beeline for the bed. He planted himself against the pillows like he belonged and patted the space next to him.

"Jin Jin! Over here!" He called, all toothy smile and innocent ears. His tail was still wrapped in bandages, ribbon carefully layered over the top but the casual swish of it was starting to return.

He eyed the space before his eyes flicked back to the open door. The door *was* open and there hadn't been an explicit rule about *not* sitting on the bed with Felix, so it was probably fine, right?

He took a deep breath, stepping over the mess of limbs on his floor, his friends already making little makeshift nests with the extra pillows and blankets Hyunjin had collected and neatly folded on his desk chair.

He sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, Felix immediately latching onto his back like a barnacle.

The taller boy hardly had time to blush before Jisung was bounding over with a look of nervous determination, pulling Minho after him.

"Okay, let's do this," He said, setting his jaw and sitting next to Hyunjin on the bed. He tilted his ear toward him like he expected Hyunjin to pierce his ears using his fucking fingernails.

"Now?" Felix asked, ears twitching in interest.

Jisung nodded heartily. “Yeah, if I don’t do it now, I’ll chicken out.”

“Are you sure? You don’t *have* to-”

“-Oh, he’s sure.” Minho interrupted Hyunjin. “His parents have taken him to get his ears pierced *three separate times* and every time he’s backed out at the last minute.”

“Well *yeah!* How would you feel if a big guy, covered in tattoos, probably named *Butch* was approaching *you* with a needle?!”

Minho have him a withering glare. “It was at the mall! Her name was probably *Heather* and she was probably an honor student working her first part time job.”

“Still had a needle though,” Jisung sulked.

“Yeah, and so will Hyunnie,” Seungmin pointed out from where he was sprawled on the floor.

Jisung rolled his eyes and tilted his head back toward the ceiling. “I *know,* but it’s *Hyunjin.* I *know* him! I *trust* him!” He sat back up and pinned Hyunjin with wide, genuine boba eyes. “So come on Jin, please? I promise, I won’t chicken out this time!”

Hyunjin sighed. He glanced at Minho only to receive a little shrug and a nod yes. If Minho thought it was okay, then who was he to deny him?

“Okay. Let me get the supplies,” Hyunjin said, standing up to a cheer from Jisung and a disgruntled little huff from his boyfriend who had been busy clinging to him. He looked back to see Felix sulking on the bed and extended a hand to him, palm up.

“Wanna help me gather the stuff, Lixie?” He offered.

The blond immediately perked up, taking his hand eagerly and jumping to his feet like he’d just been invited on a Mediterranean cruise and not a quick trip around the house.

Changbin catcalled after them while Chan jokingly told them to stay out of trouble. Seriously, what did they think he and Felix were going to get up to in a house full of people and open doors and ground rules?
First he hit up the bathroom to grab a clean towel and some saline wash. He handed them to Felix who carried them like he’d been

bestowed a *very* important job. He held them with honor and pride as they made their way back downstairs.

“What next?” Felix asked, as they made their way back to the kitchen.

“Ice.” Hyunjin replied, grabbing a plastic cup. “We’ll want to try to numb his lobes so it hurts less.”

“Is it gonna hurt a lot?” Felix asked, sounding more curious than scared.

But Hyunjin just shrugged. “Not a lot. And it’s over really fast. But knowing Jisung-”

“-he’ll probably still freak out.”

The brunette chuckled and nodded, scooping the ice out of the freezer and into his cup. “Exactly.”

He closed the freezer and Felix looked up at him. “Anything else?”

Hyunjin shook his head as he ran through a quick mental checklist. “All that’s left is a needle but I should have a sewing needle in my craft supplies.”

To anyone else, that would have been an embarrassing admission but for some reason, when Hyunjin said anything about his nerdy hobbies, his boyfriend seemed to think it was adorable.

“Of course you would,” Felix said fondly, biting his bottom lip and swaying on his feet.

Hyunjin was just about to lead them upstairs when he felt little fingers catch his wrist.

“Jin Jin?”

The paused, turning to look at his blushing boyfriend who seemed adorably shy.

“Can I…get a kiss?” He said it quietly, biting his bottom lip and shifting his weight from foot to foot as he glanced up from under his lashes.

And god, if there was one thing Hyunjin had learned over the last few weeks, it was that when Felix *asked* for a kiss? He was powerless

against it.

He nodded, letting out a shallow, stunted exhale as his body immediately moved in. He collected Felix into his arms and bent down enough to slot their lips together.

He'd never get over it. The way Felix would stretch up on his toes to get closer. The way the blond would sigh against his lips like he'd been waiting all day for this. The way his fingers would twist into the fabric of Hyunjin's shirt, like he was challenging the world to *try* to rip them apart. The fact that Felix *wanted* Hyunjin to kiss him enough to fucking *ask* for one?

Hyunjin tilted his head ever so slightly, his hands coming up to cradle Felix's face against his own.

He suddenly wished there *wasn't* a house full of people. He suddenly wished it was just him and Felix, alone in the kitchen, alone in the house, alone in the world.

The blond made a needy little noise and shoved closer, his calves straining as he threw his arms around Hyunjin's neck and tightened.

"Jin," he sighed, moving in for another kiss the second one ended.

"Lixie," Hyunjin breathed, still amazed that Felix would sigh against his lips and say his name like it was heaven.

A crazy thought sprung to mind. One where he stopped down low and hooked Felix's behind the legs. One where he hoisted him up and and sat him back down on the kitchen counter. One where Felix would giggle and shriek and cling to him at the spontaneity.

One where he'd open his legs and pull Hyunjin between them-

A creaking footstep from upstairs sounded right over their head and Hyunjin sprang back, eyes wide with fear. He couldn't ignore the way Felix was panting, staring at him like he was the only thing in the world.

"I uh…we should probably get back upstairs before uh…someone comes looking." Hyunjin chuckled awkwardly, his blush leaking all the way down his neck and probably his chest too.

Maybe it was a trick of the light or something when it looked like Felix's eyes were following his blush, big brown eyes crawling over his

chest like he wanted to see underneath his shirt.

The blond cleared his throat with his own awkward laugh. “Yeah, we uh…we don't want to give them a reason to put more rules in place.”

Hyunjin nodded, collecting the cup of ice off the counter and passing it awkwardly from hand to hand. Felix mimicked him, grabbing the towel and saline rinse off the counter and smiling shyly at him.

They walked back up the stairs, twin blushes on their cheeks and secret glances shared. The sound of their friends laughing and chatting grew the closer they got to his room and Hyunjin was overcome by the urge to capture just one last moment with Felix.

His hand reached out, snagging the blond’s wrist and getting the shorter man to turn around, eyebrow raised in question.

Before he could think twice, Hyunjin used his hold to bring that little unoccupied hand up toward his face. He dipped down, placing a kiss on the back of his hand. He inhaled that sweet scent of fake peaches slowly and looked up to see the blond staring at him with wide eyes and a pretty pink blush.

“I’m really glad you’re here, Lix.” Hyunjin said simply. Understatement of the century? Sure. But it was still true.

The blond blinked once, slowly, like he was lost in thought. “I’m glad I’m here too, Jinnie.” He sounded breathless, like that kiss had punched all the air out of his lungs.

Hyunjin placed one last kiss on the back of his hand, amazed that it was even allowed before standing back up to his full height.

“Come on.” He said with a smile, pulling Lix down the hallway again. “Let’s do this before Jisung chickens out again.”

*****

Jisung did not chicken out, but he *did* cry. Like, a lot. Like, a disproportionate amount. Like, you’d think he’d been tied down and forced against his will when in reality, he’d fucking begged for it.

Hyunjin had asked if he was sure when he’d walked back in, supplies

in hand. He'd asked again if he was sure when the brunette flinched at the *ice cube.* And he'd asked one last time, needle sanitized to the best of his ability and poised at Jisung's earlobe. And each time, the bubbly brunette had rolled his eyes and said he was *totally* sure even though he had this raw little edge to his voice.

Hyunjin had glanced at Minho who was hovering over Jisung's shoulder, sitting on the floor behind him with his arms already wrapped around his little waist. Minho had merely shrugged and nodded, tightening his hold on his boyfriend.

Hyunjin had instructed him to take a deep breath and on the count of three, let it out. He'd pushed the needle forward smoothly.

Jisung had broken into tears *immediately,* trying to run away from Hyunjin even as he told him to sit still so he could get the earring in.

"If you don't let me get the jewelry in, this will all be for nothing." He warned as Felix handed him the little silver hoop they'd prepped.

"It's not even bleeding that much," Seungmin said unhelpfully.

Jisung's face went pale, "I'm *bleeding*?"

"I said not *much.*"

"Oh my god," Jisung whispered, his whole body starting to sway like he was going to pass out.

Minho let him sink further back against his chest and manhandled his face to the side, bearing his ear toward Hyunjin. "Just do it. He'll cry all night if he doesn't get something sparkly out of this whole ordeal."

Fast as possible and gentle as he could, Hyunjin switched the needle out for the earring, almost like he was swapping out the treasure in a booby trapped tomb.

Jisung was whimpering pitifully, making little noises of protests up until the moment Hyunjin declared his work done and held up the little mirror he'd brought for Jisung to take a look.

The *second* he spied the silver hoop gleaming in his ear, he was wide eyed and giggling, batting his lashes at the mirror and going on and on about how cute he looked and how he wanted a million more ear piercings and would Hyunjin do them all now?

“I think one is enough for tonight,” Chan said amicably, patting Jisung on the shoulder.

The brunette pouted but accepted it.
He spent the rest of the night talking about how it hardly even hurt and how he must have a super high pain tolerance and it was all Hyunjin could do not to roll his eyes. Felix would just giggle and roll his eyes alongside him while muttering, “Oh wow quickly they forget.”

The rest of the night required much less precision and tears as Jeongin busted out the Monopoly board he’d brought and they embarked on a three hour game where someone *Changbin* became an absolute real estate tycoon and *Minho* kept getting properties bought out from underneath him. Seungmin threatened to flip the board at least twice and Felix, who had *begged* to be the banker, got overwhelmed after the fifth turn and asked Hyunjin to take over for him.

By the time the game wrapped up, Chan was yawning and asking if they could watch a movie. Which apparently was code for *‘I want to go to bed but I don’t want to admit it so hopefully no one will notice if I happen to doze off.’*

They had relocated to the living room and taken it over completely. Hyunjin sat on the floor, back against the couch with Felix’s legs on either side of him. Changbin sat next to him, shoulder to shoulder like it was easier than breathing and Chan sat on his other side, eyes already closed by the time the opening credits to Iron Man 2 finished.

Jeongin, Seungmin, Minho and Jisung had all piled on the couch around Felix, Jisung practically in Minho’s lap and looking perfectly content there.

Hyunjin was lost pretty much as soon as the movie started. He never really watched super hero movies but it didn’t matter because Felix’s warmth was behind him and his little fingers were trailing over his scalp in soothing circles that were threatening to send him to sleep.

After a while, he felt a weight on top of his head as Felix placed his chin there, sighing contentedly as his arms lay over his shoulders, fingers loose in front of Hyunjin’s chest. It was like he was melting on top of him and Hyunjin couldn’t help the way his fingers found the end of the blond’s tail, threading through his soft fur over and over again.

The blond’s body got heavier, his deep, even breaths starting to pull

out as a rumble. Eventually, the steady hum became a low purr, vibrating from the top of Hyunjin's head all the way down his body.

He smiled, feeling honored in ways he couldn't explain.

"Is he purring?"

He turned his head slowly to the side to see a bleary eyed chan grinning at him lazily, his eyes barely open.

"Yeah." Hyunjin confirmed.

"Cute," Chan muttered with a giggle. "You two are so cute."

"Naw, that's all Lix," Hyunjin assured him, even as his heart fluttered a little.

Chan giggled again, his head lolling back to the other side as he fell back to sleep.

Hyunjin felt a foot nudge his side before hearing Jeongin from behind him. "I'm glad you guys figured it out. Lix has liked you forever."

"And I've liked him forever too," Hyunjin said simply. It felt good not to have to hide that part of himself anymore. After all, it had become the largest part of his heart.

The movie played itself out and by the time the credits were rolling, Chan, Seungmin and Jisung were starting to snore and Felix was close to melting completely.

They all ascended the stairs, trying their best to be quiet as they took turns using the restroom and brushing their teeth.

Hyunjin offered Felix his bed but the blond had shook his head, biting his bottom lip like he wanted to ask something. But he didn't. Instead, he made a little nest on the floor, curling up and burying his face in the fluff of his tail.

The rest of the boys sprawled out on the floor, limbs everywhere, peaking out from underneath mountains of blankets.

They clicked off the lights, said goodnight, broke into random giggles and hushed *shut ups* before slowly, the chatter died down and the room got quiet.

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“Jin Jin?”

Hyunjin heard the voice of an angel beckoning him from the edge of his dreams.

“Jin Jin,” It said again, a low whisper that cut through the fog of sleep like sun breaking through early morning clouds.

Hyunjin’s eyes fluttered open. The room was dark and still but when he turned his head to the side, he saw a head of blond hair glowing softly beside him.

“Lixie?” He asked, reaching up to rub clumsy fists over his heavy eyes.

The blond’s little face was peering over the edge of the bed, fingers gripped into the edge like he was holding himself in place. His hair was fluffy and wavey, his freckles somehow shining even in the low light of the moon.

“What’s up?” He asked, his body feeling heavy as he rolled onto his side to face him.

The blond was gazing at him with those wide eyes that made him so fucking malliable.

“I want cuddles,” He whispered, his bottom lip pouting out.

Hyunjin glanced over the see of sleeping bodies toward the wide open door. “I dunno, Lix…” he said regretfully.

“The door is open.” Felix said, guessing at what Hyunjin was thinking. “And it’s not like they specifically said we couldn’t cuddle.”

It was true. Technically. But Hyunjin wasn’t sure if they should be operating on technicalities here.

Seeing his hesitancy, Felix inched closer, his ears drooping ever so slightly as the turned up the pouting to eleven. “Just for a little bit? Please?”

And Hyunjin was just a man. A man with a terribly adorable boyfriend who wanted cuddles.

He sighed and scooted back, patting the bed beside him. “Okay, but just for a little bit.”

Felix squirmed happily, nearly pouncing into the bed and curling up tight against his chest. He wiggled under the covers, his soft tail laying over Hyunjin’s hip as they faced one another, nearly nose to nose.

Felix sighed happily, like he’d been craving this all night.

Hyunjin sleepily reached out a hand, threading his fingers carefully through the strands of long blond hair so he could scratch at the base of his ears. The texture of the fur there was so different. Almost downy, like silk.

A little purr poured from Felix, dreamy and content.

“Good kitten,” Hyunjin murmured.

He swore, the blond preened at the praise, his fur standing on end like it was fluffing up to look *extra* soft and pettable.

“The *best* kitten,” He added, just to make it clear that he fucking adored him.

His low purr persisted, even and steady like the pull of time. Hyunjin wondered if there would be a future where he could fall asleep to it every night. His favorite white noise.

“Do you think, maybe someday, you could pierce *my* ear?” Felix asked, his voice relaxed in a way it rarely was. He was typically full of energy, squirming around and ready to play. But right now, freckles out, he was gazing at Hyunjin with such basic simplicity, it took his breath away.

“Yeah?”

The blond nodded.

“Which ones?” Hyunjin wondered, his fingers trailing away from his fluffy ears, down the side of his face and under the blanket of hair where his human ears hid. They didn’t get nearly enough attention, Hyunjin decided, as he stroked the lobe lightly.

He felt a shiver race down Felix’s spine as he watched Hyunjin’s eyes.

“These ones?” He asked, giving them a gentle pinch before trailing the backs of his fingers back up to their favorite place. He cradled his

furry ear in his palm and gave it a playful little tug. “Or these?”

“The kitten ones.” Felix said, eyes glowing in the dark.

Hyunjin passed his thumb over the thin triangle, reveling in how soft and delicate they were. “You’d trust me with that?” It seemed risky. Scary even.

Felix didn’t even like his ears being *touched* most of the time. But now he was saying he wanted Hyunjin to pierce them?

He let his eyes fall down to find Felix’s eyes.

He watched a smile spread over his lips. It was wide but relaxed, like he didn’t have a single worry in the world. His small hand emerged from under the blanket, cupping his jaw. He drew a silent thumb over Hyunjin’s bottom lip with something like yearning aching in his eyes.

“I’d trust you with everything, Jin Jin.”

The words felt heavy. Not in a bad way though. No, more like a weighted blanket that tampered all your anxieties down. Like a solid, grounding hug that reminded you that everything was going to be okay.

He felt the words welling up in the back of his throat.

I love you.

But it was too soon, right? And there were six other people in the room and Felix was going to have to climb out of bed soon and it would break Hyunjin’s heart to say that and *not* get to hold him forever after.

He was saved by the soft press of lips against his own. Simple and clean. The smell of peaches mixing with moonlight and the rumble of a purr underneath it all.

This was heaven. Pure and simple.

So Hyunjin kissed him back, holding his face to his own and wondering if he could taste the words on this tongue. Wondering if he minded. Wondering if he felt the same.

Chapter End Notes

God, I love Jisung so much lol. And Kitten Lixie?? He's a cuddle

machine Next chapter the boys take a step forward...and also back...SEE YOU ON THURSDAY!!!

End Notes

Updates will be Thursday and Sunday; see you soon!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!